

Novel



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Ten years have passed. Miyuki is a shop assistant at a bookstore, and Akane is working at her parents' okonomiyaki shop. Yayoi is a popular manga artist, Nao is a soccer team coach, and Reika is a teacher at a middle school. Five girls are seemingly living peaceful days at first glance, however, they began to realise something is wrong with this world. That...is the *Story of Despair* crafted by Joker...

Kukukukuku...

*Ladies and gentlemen, the **Story of Despair** has already begun!*

Revived Once More
by Joker's Words, PreCure...



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Chapter 1 – Hoshizora Miyuki

Somewhere out there, there was once a 2nd-year middle school student named Hoshizora Miyuki – an always optimistic girl who loved happy things and believed that happiness would surely be waiting so long as she had a perfect smile ready on her face.

Miyuki had moved to the wonderful town of Nanairogaoka. Hurrying to school so she wouldn't be late on her first day, she encountered a mysterious picture book flying in the sky. From inside the picture book appeared a fairy named Candy.

Candy had been sent on a mission to save the land of fairytales, *Märchenland*, from the Bad End Kingdom's plan in giving it the worst possible ending. To stop this from happening, she came to Earth to find the legendary warriors, PreCure.

But then one of the generals of the Bad End Kingdom appeared – Wolfrun. The generals' goal was to paint the hearts of people in despair to gather Bad Energy, and use that power to revive the sealed Emperor of Evil, Pierrot. To achieve this, they stole the source of Märchenland's power of happiness, the *Cure Decors*, and changed them into Red Noses. Those noses could create the horrifying Akanbe, monsters that would go on a violent rampage.

To protect Candy, Miyuki summoned up enough courage to transform into the legendary warrior, PreCure. She turned out to be one of the PreCure Candy had been searching for, and her name was Cure Happy. After a splendid job defeating the Akanbe, Miyuki and Candy started looking for the other four PreCure together.

Cure Sunny was the always cheerful and brilliant sun – Hino Akane.

Cure Peace was talented at drawing and loved heroes – Kise Yayoi.

Cure March was always playing it straight as the ace of the Girls' Soccer Club – Midorikawa Nao.

Cure Beauty was the Student Council President, gifted in both looks and smarts – Aoki Reika.

The five girls from the same class joined forces to fight against the generals of the Bad End Kingdom: Wolfrun, Akaōni and Majorīna, as well as the monsters they created one after another. If they could purify the Red Noses that create the Akanbe and recover every stolen Cure Decor, the imprisoned ruler of Märchenland, the *Royale Queen*, could be revived to save her land.

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The Cures' hideout was in another dimension called the '*Mysterious Library*', where fairytales from all around the world were gathered. Its bookshelves were connected with others throughout the entire world, allowing Miyuki and the others to warp to any place they imagined.

The girls combined their strengths to overcome many hardships, but when they had finally finished collecting all the Cure Decors, the leader of the Bad End Kingdom's generals appeared – Joker. He kidnapped Candy and stole all but one of their hard-earned Cure Decors.

The five PreCure headed to the Bad End Kingdom together with Candy's big brother, Pop. They fought the generals to finally take back their friend and the Cure Decors, and transformed into their new '*Princess Forms*', which helped them successfully beat back the revived Pierrot.

However, even though all the Cure Decors were present, the Royale Queen would not awake from her slumber. That was because she had granted all her power to the PreCure in order for them to use their Princess Forms – it was the best, the only thing, she could do.

In order to gather new Cure Decors and to stop the evil generals' scheme in Pierrot's complete revival, the five PreCure kept on fighting.

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One day, the core of Pierrot came flying from outer space – the final battle against the Bad End Kingdom had begun. At the end of an intense fight, Wolfrun, Akaōni and Majorīna were touched by the PreCure's purifying kindness, restoring them back to their fairy forms. To everyone's surprise, the three generals were originally from Märchenland all along.

Afterwards, the five overcame a dire battle against the vile Bad End PreCure, and finally challenged an enormous Pierrot, who absorbed Joker to complete his revival.

However, Pierrot was incredibly powerful. If they were to have any hope in defeating him, the five girls would have to use the last of their power, but that would come at the cost of never seeing Candy and Pop ever again. But even so, they confronted him with all their might, in order to save both Märchenland and Earth. Candy also changed into Royale Candy to lend her strength to the PreCure. As it turned out, Candy was actually the next Queen of Märchenland.

And just like that – Pierrot vanished, peace returned to Märchenland, and it was said that all the fairies lived happily ever after.

In the world where harmony had returned, Miyuki, Akane, Yayoi, Nao and Reika...each of them began to walk their own stories. Towards a twinkling, shining future...

Although they were supposed to be separated after that, Candy unexpectedly showed up. By wishing upon the stars with all her heart, she was able to come back to Miyuki and her friends again.

And so Miyuki and her friends had opened the curtains to a new story. The five lights guiding to the future – what kind of brilliant world could be waiting for them?

* * *

“Hey, in the story, what happens next?”

I come back to my senses, raising my head from the picture book. The one who asked the question was Yoshimi-chan. Evening is a busy time when the store gets crowded; from salarymen returning from work to a few high school students on their way home would drop in for a quick visit. She comes here sometimes to listen to my clumsy storytelling. While her mom is out shopping, the girl is killing time.

No, the expression ‘killing time’ isn’t exactly right. Yoshimi-chan’s eyes get big and round, gazing at the picture book that I’m reading, *The Greatest Smile*, while firmly lending an ear. I thought no-one was listening to me – it makes me glad that’s not true. “Worried about what comes after? What do you think happened, Yoshimi-chan? To the five PreCure, and to the future of this world...”

“Mmm, I dunno.”

“There isn’t anything after – that’s the end of story.”

“Awww... Keep going, I’m getting nervous.” Yoshimi-chan unhappily puffs her cheeks. It’s only natural – she’s visited here many, many times, believing that there must be a definite continuation to the story.

Hoping to persuade Yoshimi-chan, I gaze into her tranquil eyes. “But the PreCure might be fighting somewhere right now. Somewhere in this world, for us...”

“Really!?” Yoshimi-chan’s eyes become wider and wider. “Onē-chan, how do you know that? Could it be...you’ve met the PreCure?”

Waiting for exactly that question, I bring my face closer to Yoshimi-chan. And then, I show her the nameplate worn on my chest. On it, it says: ‘Nanairogaoka Station-Front Bookstore, Hoshizora Miyuki’.

“*Mi-yu-ki...*” Yoshimi-chan read the name out loud, rounding her eyes to take a long, hard look at my face. Like a kid meeting Santa Claus, she’s so full of wonder and excitement that she can barely speak. “You, Onē-chan? The main character of this story... Onē-chan, you’re Cure Happy?”

“Be sure to keep it a secret from everyone.”

When she places a finger on that mischievous smile on her lips, Yoshimi-chan tightly closes her mouth and nods. “Okay. It’s our secret!”

Looking at Yoshimi-chan’s pure and innocent smile, it greatly warms my heart. When I see children with such merry faces in front of me, I can forget about the hardships of working as a bookstore assistant, even if it’s just for a little bit.

However, in that moment, an intruder slips in to ruin our private conversation. “Liar. There’s no way the PreCure actually exist in this world.”

I hadn’t noticed how long he had been there, but it came from a boy apparently from the same kindergarten as Yoshimi-chan, who stood up with a horrid grin on his face. One time, I saw him do something in this store – a friend of mine was reading a picture book when this boy snatched it away, making him cry.

Without caring for Yoshimi-chan’s loss for words, the boy keeps talking. “That sort of picture book, it’s just a plain ol’ made-up story. I should know. My whole kindergarten’s doing a drama club like that. It’s all a derushion, a derushion.”

Despite his young age, he knows the proper use of a word as hard as ‘delusion’. That point was at least worth an honest compliment. However, that kind of attitude towards Yoshimi-chan is unacceptable. I say to him, “Hey, that isn’t a nice thing to say. One day, when you’re in trouble and miserable every now and then, the PreCure might come to help you. But for a child who keeps saying such mean things...they won’t come to help, you know.”

“Liar. When will the PreCure come to help?”

“Well...I’m sure someday...”

“In what month, on what day and at what time, how many times has the Earth turned?”

Hrrrm, this boy is a real pain.

“It’s not a lie!” Yoshimi-chan shouts impatiently. The customers in the store are also startled and turn in our direction. “Because, the lady here is Cure Happy! Right? Onē-chan!”

Uh-oh. Yoshimi-chan, even though you promised to only keep it a secret between us...

The boy stares at me without so much as blinking. He’s somehow giving me a bad feeling about this. “Ehhh? Onē-chan, a PreCure? If you’re really a PreCure, transform and show us. Come on, hurry up!”

Huh? Before I know it, it feels like all the eyes in the store are fixated on me. Given the situation, I have no choice but to make an excuse. “Ehehe, I can’t transform without any bad guys around.” Although I stick my tongue out with a smile, the boy refuses to back down.

“See! I knew you were lying! Even though you’re a grown-up, you believe in those kind of derushions! You’re really childish.”

At that moment, hearing a woman’s voice call out, ‘Yoshimi!’, I lift my head. Yoshimi-chan’s mom has turned up with a smile on her face after having finished her shopping. “Mama!” Yoshimi-chan rushes to return to her mother with a brilliant smile, but then turns around to face towards me. “Onē-chan! Bye-bye! See you tomorrow!”

I smile and wave back, too. As Yoshimi-chan join hands with her mother, they leave the store. Judging by their mood, I'm sure they will come back again tomorrow to *Kids Connect Square* and no doubt listen to my storytelling.

When I look back, the boy from before is caught by the scruff of the neck by his mother again as always, ready to leave the place. As he's being pulled by his mother, his face firmly turns in my direction, going "bleeeh" with his tongue sticking out. Despite my bitter smile, I wave to the boy. Even if he's a horrible kid, a customer is a customer. I hope they also come back here again...

Breathing a sigh, I look back at *Kids Connect Square*. With the children gone, the carpet's surface is now silent. While tidying up the messy books, and staring at the cover of that one book, I couldn't help but smile. So many fairytales and fantasies – all of them depict my favourite happy endings.

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My name is Hoshizora Miyuki. I'm 24 years old. I've loved picture books and stories ever since I was a child. About two years ago, I got a part-time job here at the Nanairogaoka Station-Front Bookstore. My fondness for picture books greatly appealed to the store manager, and I was given the responsibility of taking turns in the children's books corner. Whenever there was time, I would read a picture book to the children at *Kids Connect Square*.

Is it a wonderful job? Yeah, I really think so. But the truth is, it wasn't a job the store asked me to do, and rarely do I get any thanks from anyone. So it's more like volunteering. However, for me it's a time of utmost bliss when a child takes an interest in picture books these days. It makes me happy to look back on my childhood.

The way Yoshimi-chan yelled today, it was almost like seeing my old self. Even though she come here often, today is the first time I ever got the chance to talk to her. I'm sure that a continuation of the picture book is on her mind, making her nervous, and then she found the courage to take that first step without any doubts.

I was also really shy when I was small; I couldn't talk to anyone by myself at the time. That's why...I can easily understand how Yoshimi-chan feels.

Even if there was just one today, I want to make lots of children love picture books and stories, and have them wishfully feel the possibility of fantasy. No matter how tough a reality waits for us, if we keep believing, one day an *ultra-happy* future will...

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"Hoshizora-san!" The store manager's voice calls out, snapping me back to my senses.

The middle-aged female manager, with a grumpy face similar to a vice principal straight out of a manga, is standing next to the register, glaring at me intensely. In fact, all the bookstore employees call her 'vice principal' as a nickname, and it's because of

that they straighten their backs when passing by in front of her. Of course, I'm no exception.

I answer 'Yes!' and stand up like a middle-schooler when mentioned, quickly heading toward where the manager stands. Once we've entered the meeting room next to the cash register, the store manager says a few words:

"Please have a seat."

And just like that, I'm urged to sit at the other side of the table. The eyes behind the manager's glasses shine eerily. Now, it begins. The usual lecture...

"Hoshizora-san, please tell me what you were doing earlier."

"Well, bonding with the children at *Kids Connect Square*..."

"I am asking what you were doing SPECIFICALLY."

"Reading picture books! Even if it was just for one child, I was hoping to make her love lots of books..."

"That does not matter. The charm of books...are their ability to educate the children who will all shoulder the future – a terribly wonderful thing. You personally volunteered for the activity, while aptly fulfilling your work as staff of a common bookstore. Would you say you approve of that?"

"Yes! Thank you so much. Thanks to everybody's help, *Kids Connect Square* was a success...ful in that it did not go so well. But sometimes children would drop by, picking out picture books to take in their hands. This is also because of the store manager's kind consideration that..."

"However, as staff of the bookstore, you should be aptly fulfilling your duties...have you forgotten that arrangement?" The manager's expression gradually becomes stern. *Ahh, this is an unpleasant pattern.* "The sales of children's books have continued to fall rather than grow. Despite the fact you have volunteered to continue reading for several months now..."

"I am so sorry. I will try to work harder. So..."

"Your hard work is not the problem. You...what kind of books have you been reading all this time?"

"What kind of books, you ask...?" I had in my hand *The Greatest Smile* picture book, fiddling with it on top of my knee.

"You were reading a picture book that is not for sale. Am I correct?" I resigned myself, taking out and presenting *The Greatest Smile* on the table's surface. The manager's face becomes even sterner. "What is this?"

“Well, it is a picture book called *The Greatest Smile*.”

“We are not selling this, correct?”

“...Yes. But, it is a very good picture book. It would be a nice opportunity to get children to know about the brilliance of the story—”

“Hoshizora-san, I have heard you talk about that book on occasions. I also understand that it is quite important to you. A picture book of memories drawn by yourself when you were a middle school student...is that right?”

“Yes...” It’s just as it sounds, this book was handmade by me. Both the drawings, and the writing – I was still in middle school when I yearned to make it myself. Only one copy exists in this world – my very own picture book. That’s why the protagonist’s name is Hoshizora Miyuki, the same as mine.

“I know very well you have a strong emotional attachment to that book. The desire to pass down the story to children is quite a wonderful thing. However, this place is neither a kindergarten nor a daycare. It is the Nanairogaoka Station-Front Bookstore. It is your job to sell books. Please perform unrelated activities outside of business hours.”

Giving me no room to object, the manager keeps on talking without missing a beat.

“Generally, your work has been undeniably sloppy. Despite having already been working here for two years now, you can barely manage the cash register... Evidently, it is too late for that. Just take pride and appreciation in being an employee of the historic Nanairogaoka Station-Front Bookstore.”

“...Okay.” Feeling disheartened, I went back to the children’s books corner, and after setting *The Greatest Smile* down on a stool in *Kids Connect Square*, I start to organize the bookshelves. The store manager’s lecture is still ringing in my ears. The conversation with her seemed reasonable, and I also understand that what I’m doing extends outside the sort of work a bookstore assistant should do. Getting scolded like this today again...it isn’t the first time.

In spite of that, I can definitely say this picture book is a very special existence to me. *The Greatest Smile*...it’s a precious book that opened up my life. The way that I am today, it’s no exaggeration to say that it’s because this picture book exists. Since...since...

...hm?

In the middle of organizing the shelves, I stare at *The Greatest Smile* left over at *Kids Connect Corner*. On the front cover, there is a crude drawing depicting the five PreCure.

Fantasy has infinite possibilities. Ever since the creation of this picture book, whenever I’m in pain, whenever I’m sad, it would help me encourage myself to overcome all kinds of difficulties. Fantasy – it is the greatest strength you can use to save yourself.

Just like how *The Greatest Smile* saved...what I meant to say is, it was undoubtedly me who was saved by it back in middle school. So even now after becoming an adult, by reading this book at the store, I want to try and save the hearts of children. My time as a middle school student...I, myself, was saved...

But...I wonder why? Why...did I draw this? What drove me to create *The Greatest Smile* picture book?

As though my mind has been clouded by an invisible darkness, I cannot exactly remember. No, it's not that I can't remember. Since the beginning of my days in middle school, I guess it's simply because there was nothing noteworthy in particular. But then again, I wonder if that's why I came up with such a picture book, in order to break down the daily gloom...?

"Hoshizora-san, quit spacing out and move your arms." Coming back to my senses with the voice of the store manager's warning, I immediately resume arranging the bookshelves.

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Getting ready to head home, I leave using the backdoor entrance of the bookstore exclusive for staff members. The veil of night is coming down, the sky becoming enveloped by dark clouds.

"Miyuki, good job."

When I look over my shoulder to that voice, behind the bookstore is the silhouette of a man in a business suit standing under the light of a lamp post. "Dad!" His hair is styled to look young, but a few gray strands have started to emerge; he has rimmed glasses and a nice gentle smile. He's my dad – it looks like Hoshizora Hiroshi has been waiting here for his daughter to finish work. "But Dad, why...?"

"I happened to drop by to check on the magazines for sale. That Manager-san, I heard her say, 'Miyuki sure is working hard'."

"Geez, I wish you could've talked to me if you were there."

"Hahaha, sorry about that. Thought I shouldn't get in the way of Miyuki's hard work, you know."

My dad, he isn't a very good liar... The store manager just lost her temper at me not too long ago. Besides, the magazine shelf was right across from me, but I couldn't see anyone dressed like my dad at all.

I head home together with my dad while smiling bitterly inside. Dad is a publisher and a magazine editor. It's not just today, either; he would drop by the Nanairogaoka Station-Front Bookstore saying it's occasionally for business, but also to come and see what I'm doing at work. Although no matter how considerably adorable his daughter is,

having to frequently show up at the workplace like that...it's almost worrying to a degree.

"Oh yeah, Miyuki, about that picture book – I tried talking with the editorial department of children's books."

"Dad, you did what I asked!?" It was about none other than the picture book from before, *The Greatest Smile*, that I had drawn. I wanted many more children to read this book. Now that I think about it, Dad has been consulting with his publisher of children's books from time to time about whether or not it could be published. "And?"

"Yeah...too bad, I'm afraid, but they said it would be difficult to publish."

"I see..."

"Dad likes to think it's a very wonderful picture book. I think your open mind and pure heart are well conveyed, Miyuki, and once it's actually reached the hands of children throughout Japan, then– no, I think it can capture the hearts of children around the world. It may not have been possible this time, but I'm sure there are probably publishers and editors who would be interested in it. On the day it gets published, it'll get an animated adaptation, or get made into a movie...where dreams are forever."

"Dad, thank you." Since my dad isn't a good liar, I know he undoubtedly enjoys this picture book from the bottom of his heart. For the sake of his lovely daughter, I guess he went out of his way to talk with an editor of another department. Although, to go as far as specifically publishing a picture book drawn by an amateur during her time in middle school is something the publisher just can't afford.

"In recent years, there's been something of a publishing recession, where they're having a very hard time financially. Compared to the old days, children and even adults just don't read books anymore. All of them are far too busy with reality, so there's barely any time to spare for the heart to enjoy imaginative stories. I think the situation is genuinely alarming..."

While I'm absent-mindedly listening to my dad's conversation, I aimlessly look up at the sky. The weather hasn't been great lately; even when looking at the night, I can't see many stars. No, it probably isn't just due to the weather. In the last few years, the area in front of Nanairogaoka Station has continued to develop: new shopping malls and supermarkets, pachinko parlours, and more are opening one after the other. Although when I first moved here, I could see plenty more stars in the night sky...

It's almost the same as life. As people grow older, they lose sight of a lot of things. As a child, I embraced valuable things like my dreams, my ideals, and my memories.

"Miyuki, you used to adore picture books and fantasy when you were little."

I raise my head to Dad's words. "Yeah, it's thanks to you for buying all those picture books, Dad. Mom also read them to me in a futon every night before I went to bed, wouldn't she?"

"Do you remember? Miyuki's very first love was *Peter Pan*."

"Geez, stop talking about those old days." When I was a child, I believed without a doubt that Neverland really existed somewhere in this world. Peter Pan and Tinker Bell were real; I thought for sure that they would one day come to take me with them. The *Peter Pan* picture book from then, it's still on the shelf in my room. However, there is no Neverland in the real world – Peter Pan will never come. And of course, neither will the PreCure...

Right now I'm working as an ordinary shop assistant at the bookstore, but I didn't completely give up on my dream.

I was a member of the book committee during my days in middle school. I wanted to make my dream of becoming a children's stories author come true, so I entered into a vocational college for a novel-writing course. I've indulgently read lots of books; sometimes even volunteered to read at kindergartens and elementary schools. I also made some effort at creative activities and, while in college, wrote a number of original fairytales. One of them, *The Secret of Smile-chan*, was selected as an honourable mention for the 'Tōdō Izumi Fairytale Grand Prize'.

Even if it was just an honourable mention, my name and the title of my work got published in magazines and websites, which made both Dad and Mom give me a breathtaking celebration. Although my grandma lives alone out in the countryside, she also went out of her way to rush on by and congratulate me. My friends were delighted about the news as well. I was really happy back then; it felt like I was dreaming. Hearing the voice of publishers here and there with the way things were, I held onto the belief that I must walk the life of an *ultra-happy* children's stories author.

But, I had won an honourable mention only once; a bittersweet start to the goal of opening my path of becoming a writer to the world. After graduating from vocational college, I eventually became busy focusing on real-life one day, and any time to write fairytales disappeared. I couldn't keep putting my faith in the power of imaginative stories. Right now, the easiest thing to do is read *The Greatest Smile* picture book at the place where I work, the Nanairogaoka Station-Front Bookstore.

"Ah, Miyuki. You're here with Dad?"

When I turn to that voice, a mother holding a shopping bag comes out from the supermarket. She's my mom, Hoshizora Ikuyo, working as a housewife. "Mom! What's for dinner todaaay~?"

"We're having hotpot tonight. Grandma sent us plenty of fresh vegetables. And on the phone, she wanted to tell you she said hi."

“Ohhh? Is Grandma doing okay?”

“Yep. She said she’s going to visit again, this summer break.”

“Yaaay! Soon, soon!” The three of us start to head back home. The lovely smell of dinner from houses here and there wafts by and tickles my nose. *Ahh, the smell of dinner, it just makes me feel total happiness.*

“Miyuki, you seem a little tired lately. Are you all right? That part-time job, it’s not too hard, is it?” My mom looks at me, worried.

“Nu-uh, not at all.”

“All right then...but you’re a hard worker, so if something bad happens, just talk to me, your mom. Okay?”

“Okay~~” My mom always encourages clumsy ol’ me with a smile. Whenever I’m feeling down, whenever I’m worried, she would help me reflect on my feelings before I put them into words, and ease my worries with kind remarks. I wonder if I can be a dreamy, mature woman like Mom? I wonder if I can spend my life ahead of me, smiling all the time like Mom?

I glance at *The Greatest Smile* picture book peeking through the bag.

I’m sure my future is shining bright – I’ve believed in that ever since I was a child. I wish I could also save the world from the future of a Bad End, just like the PreCure... I wish I could always do my best with a smile, just like Hoshizora Miyuki in the picture book...

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In every story, there is a beginning and an end. There is no story that will last forever. It’s the same as the real world, the same as life. There is nothing eternally never-ending.

On the next day, when I arrive a little late to the Nanairogaoka Station-Front Bookstore for work, for some reason the store employees are sitting in the meeting room with sunken faces.

The time is nine o’clock in the morning before opening hours. At the time we usually hold our regular meetings every morning, I slip in a few minutes late. Last night, when I was trying to put down on paper some fairytales I had on my mind for the first time in a while, and after working out an idea or two, I completely stayed up all throughout the night and overslept. To have my mom wake me up like this – nothing has changed ever since I was a middle school student.

In the meeting room, there are five employees in all. They are sitting around the table, along with the ‘vice principal’ store manager.

“Good morning, everyone! Please excuse me for being late again! Let’s work hard and keep in high spirits again today...” Although I greet them cheerfully, everyone hesitates to move, their expressions telling me that they can’t listen to some of my words. *Whuaa...*? This isn’t just a minor issue. In any case, that nitpicky manager...even though I was late, she hasn’t budged an inch like a bronze statue; she’s just sitting there.

“Hoshizora-san! You...! How many times have you been late this month today? Kindly have some self-awareness as an employee of the Nanairogaoka Station-Front Bookstore!”

And like that, she gets mad like usual. But even then, it’s almost like the store manager isn’t taking any notice of me or something. Everyone seems to be in the middle of some kind of serious discussion. “Umm, did something happen?” When I timidly ask, the manager’s watchful eyes look up at me from behind her glasses.

“Hoshizora-san, please sit down.”

That voice makes me shudder. It’s almost unnervingly quiet with no emotion. Although the manager has been mad more than countless times up until now, this is the first time I’ve seen her so calm and collected. It’s almost as if her soul has been removed. This must be a serious incident. I wonder...did I do something to make the manager or the others angry?

While looking around at the face of every assistant who has fallen silent, I sit down. “Could it be...when I was reading picture books at *Kids Connect Square*? Were there any problems with that?”

The manager doesn’t move without so much as a twitch. Looks like it’s something different; I feel relieved.

“Ahh!? Last week, I made a mistake in the entry. Did I get in trouble for that? You see, it’s about the number of stock received for the 41st volume of *Miracle Peace*. I added one too many zeros...”

The manager doesn’t react. So it isn’t that, either.

“Then, was it after I gave a warning to that middle schoolgirl who would always browse the magazine corner the other day? Even though she wrote me off with, ‘Cut the crap, Granny.’ Did that young girl come back to make a complaint...?”

Neither the manager, not to mention all the employees, react to my words at all. It seems like the situation is even more severe.

“Hoshizora-san, because this is a sudden announcement, you may regard it as a surprise; please listen calmly.” The manager looks toward me, saying with a peculiar expression like a doctor declaring the name of a disease. “The Nanairogaoka Station-Front Bookstore...will be closing down by the end of the next coming month.”

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On that very same day of the month, despite organising the bookshelves, despite reading picture books at *Kids Connect Square*, I haven't been able to concentrate on my work at all. The sudden announcement of our closure has shook everyone to the core. They've lost their motivation to work today. 'Welcome', 'Please come again' – my voice seems to just vanish on me.

For the past two years now, I have been working a part-time job at this bookstore. I thought it would continue to exist as a place for the people of Nanairogaoka to relax – a place that would always be here in the future. I had faith in that next year and the year after that, I would be in charge of the children's books corner to be able to further bond with the children at *Kids Connect Square*. However, everything has a beginning and an end.

In the recent years, a series of major bookstores and movie theatres, restaurants and including an enormous shopping mall were completed in front of Nanairogaoka Station. The customers have been gradually distancing themselves from the row of shops by the station-front for a long time, putting them all in a dire predicament. Even just last month, a retro café that had been popular for so many years was recently forced to go out of business.

Still, it has always been here ever since I was a child. Now, I never thought the Nanairogaoka Station-Front Bookstore, the place where I work on a daily basis, would suddenly disappear one day.

"They sure had it good up until now. The Station-Front was a decent place, and the children's books corner has likewise been quite enriching, even *Kids Connect Square*. It was a blessed store, wouldn't you say?" A certain elderly employee breathes a sigh while talking like this. It's almost as if he's saying it had been already shut down.

I'm lost in thought when organising the bookshelves all day, but once evening comes, I remember the smile of my mom from last night. During such a time like this, I think Mom would encourage me with kind-hearted words. I really don't want to start feeling sad. This bookstore will be here for at least until next month, so as an employee of this bookstore, I have to work my very hardest to the very end.

I stare at *The Greatest Smile* picture book over at *Kids Connect Square*. As always, it's nearly time for Yoshimi-chan to show up. Right, I'll welcome her with a magnificent smile again today. Like Hoshizora Miyuki inside *The Greatest Smile*, I'll give it my absolute best with a smile this time for sure. That smile...will no doubt spread to dozens of people.

Sure enough, at the same time as yesterday, Yoshimi-chan arrives together with her mom to the children's books corner.



“I’m going to be shopping, so wait for me, okay?” With that said by Yoshimi-chan’s mom, she quickly leaves the store.

“Miyuki-onēchan, good afternoon!”

When Yoshimi-chan takes notice of me, she greets me in a loud voice. I bravely answer with a smile. “Yoshimi-chan, good afternoon. What should we read today?”

“*The Greatest Smile*, obviously!”

“Oookay! For you, Yoshimi-chan, today I’ll put more of my spirit than usual into this reading. Spirit, spirit~~” I cheer myself up to open *The Greatest Smile*. Whether those words were funny or weird, Yoshimi-chan involuntarily lets out a chuckle and sits down just in front of me.

Reading my story of *The Greatest Smile*, Yoshimi-chan’s eyes sparkle brightly as she listens intently again today.

*Ahh, what a relief.* Just seeing Yoshimi-chan’s smiling face makes me feel warm. I’m deeply happy inside my heart, like a ray of light has flowed in. It’s a story she has already heard many times and knows, and yet, Yoshimi-chan seems overjoyed with a look of intense concentration.

After I was done reading *The Greatest Smile* and having a pleasant chat with Yoshimi-chan, her mom had finished shopping and comes back to the store. Yoshimi-chan stands up, turning my way. “Miyuki-onēchan...can I come back again tomorrow?”

“Of course! Onē-chan will always be waiting for you, Yoshimi-chan.”

Yoshimi-chan flashes a smile. “Really? It’s a promise!”

“Yeah, promise...”

“You know, this cool bookstore, and Miyuki-onēchan too, I...I love you both.”

Those words and that smile... For a moment, I’m at a loss for words. “I see... That makes Onē-chan happy. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Yoshimi-chan expresses a radiant smile.

Afterward, Yoshimi-chan’s mom comes walking this way as she gives a slight bow. A slim and beautiful woman around the age of 30, who also looks a bit exhausted. I have no doubt that, while Yoshimi-chan’s at kindergarten, she must be off working.

“Thank you for always looking after Yoshimi.”

“Oh no, I should be thanking you. Seeing you two always come here fills me with joy.” Up until this point, I have only ever *seen* Yoshimi-chan’s mom, but this is the first time I’ve *spoken* with her.

“This little girl, she tells me and my husband all about it after we get home. *The Greatest Smile* picture book... She seems to like it a lot.”

“I feel honoured.”

The mom, fixated on Yoshimi-chan who is looking at the bookshelves lined with picture books, pulls back a smile. “Honestly, I am a bit surprised. What with Yoshimi talking with you here.”

“...What do you mean?”

“It’s because Yoshimi has a shy personality; she can’t talk to either myself or her friends and teachers at the kindergarten. She usually doesn’t smile, and it seems she would rather read picture books all alone...”

Yesterday, Yoshimi-chan came to speak to me by herself. As I thought, it was probably her last act in mustering her bravery.

“But to believe she would have a major attachment over that picture book and to you. After going back home yesterday, she talked about you, but she mentioned so much with only a wonderful smile on her face and nothing else. I wonder if that picture book has a special charm to it? Naturally, you yourself included...”

I blush before taking a step back. “Oh, no no! A shop assistant like me being a big deal is, well... I get scolded by the manager for always making nothing but mistakes, I even overslept and completely turned up late...” The store manager, who just happened to pass by in front of the children’s books corner, looks my way with those watchful eyes behind her glasses as I catch my tongue. Yoshimi-chan’s mom slips out a giggle.

“At any rate, I am grateful to you from the bottom of my heart. Well then, I’m sorry for bothering you. Thank you again for your help.”

Invited by the bow of Yoshimi-chan’s mom, I also lower my head.

“Onē-chan, bye-bye!” Yoshimi-chan waves her hand as she goes home together with her mom.

With a complicated sensation deep in my chest, I wave and smile in return.

Seeing Yoshimi-chan’s smile isn’t all that bad, but I can’t tell the truth. By the end of the next coming month, this bookstore will close down and *Kids Connect Square* will be gone with it... Beyond the magnificent smile, a cruel reality awaits...

~~~~~

“Manager, could you spare just a little moment of your time?” On that evening, after finishing up my work, I stopped the store manager in the meeting room. There were still some tasks left, it seems, with the manager looking tired as the eyes behind her glasses blink while staring back at me.

“What is it? I will not listen if it is an excuse for being late this morning.”

“That isn’t it. It’s about this lovely bookstore, about what’s going on...so after giving it some serious thought, I have a request to make. Will you not listen to what I have to say, please?” Having seen my enthusiasm, the manager gives a weary sigh and takes a seat. I also sit with the manager face-to-face across the table. “That talk about closing next month...I’m guessing you’ve already reached a decision?”

“I should have said this during the morning: the store will not survive. It is a shame, but...”

“Even if this bookstore is gone, can’t it somehow continue possibly under a different form?”

“A different form?”

“Yes! I also did some research, and even though many call them bookstores, I found out that there are various types. For example: did you know the number of book cafés have been rising recently? It’s a shop where a coffee shop and a bookstore come together, and you can read and relax while drinking things like tea or coffee. If you collaborate with a café somewhere, this lovely bookstore might even be able to survive by changing its form...”

“That being the case, I am quite aware of book cafés. I consider it to be a splendid style.”

“Then it’s—”

However, the store manager relentlessly interrupts me from speaking.

“The decision has been made to sell this land. Everything around us is designated as a target area for land readjustment. They say that a new shopping mall will be built on the site. Even if the book café you speak of comes to fruition, it will probably be impossible to do it here. Finding a new location, locating a café to collaborate with... Can you even say for certain that you can accomplish both of those and supply enough reserved funds to open our doors?”

I’m at a loss for words. But still, as things are, I couldn’t afford to back down. “If that isn’t possible, there are other ways too. How about a mobile-type bookstore? We can put the bookshelves in a truck, go to places like parks or events on a business trip by setting up a booth. Changing up the lineup of books every now and then, having new encounters with customers in every town... Don’t you think it sounds wonderful?”

“Hoshizora-san.” To the manager’s grief-stricken voice, I gulp down my words. “The decision for the closure was made by myself and mine alone. For me, I have served as the manager for over 20 years now. I love this bookstore more than anyone; I can feel the regret about the matter more than anyone.”

“But then, why... It’s too lonely and sad for things to end like this. Every day, there is a girl who looks forward to coming back here.”

“You mean the young girl who listens to your storytelling, the one who recently came to *Kids Connect Square*?” As expected of the manager – she has a firm grasp on the regular customers.

In my mind, Yoshimi-chan’s twinkling smile comes back to me. “That girl...even though she can’t even talk to her friends in kindergarten, whenever I’m reading a picture book, it gives her the courage to speak up. For her, I think the Nanairogaoka Station-Front Bookstore is irreplaceable. And for the first time in her life, I can say that this important place opened her heart to people she didn’t know. To lose a place like that, such a thing is just cruel...”

In that moment, I notice. Faint tears are glistening in the manager’s eyes.

“Hoshizora-san, I fully understand how you feel. I and several others also understand that the customers who love this store want to see it keep going, but when you call to mind that sort of face on each and every one of them, then that truly breaks the heart.”

“But, then...”

“But you know, just keeping the store running only for the sake of those few...is a bittersweet reality. It is precisely because I love this bookstore...that I want to close the book on the history of the Nanairogaoka Station-Front Bookstore the way things are now. Unless a miracle happens, this store cannot escape from shutting down.”

And then, the manager says: “Miracles...only happen in stories.”

~~~~~

The windy night is cold. I’m pondering over the store manager’s words in my head while on the way home.

Miracles happen in stories. For example: A girl oversleeps, dashes her way to school with a slice of bread in her mouth, and bumps into a strange boy around the street corner. Being equally rude to each other, and even leaving a horrible impression that was short-lived when slipping into class, a new transfer student enters during the morning homeroom. That student is, without a doubt, the boy she ran into around the corner not too long ago...that sort of pattern.

But how about in the real world, I wonder? Such a dramatic miracle is rare to encounter.

Right now, I can see a street corner in the shopping district before my eyes. I pick up the pace slightly, directly towards the bend. The second I curve around that corner, I will come across a wonderful encounter...

As I'm jogging, I involuntarily let out a strained chuckle right afterwards. This is just like that certain scene from my picture book, *The Greatest Smile*. When the main character Miyuki seems to be running late on her first day of transferring schools and makes a turn around the corner, the fairy Candy comes out from inside the picture book that fell from the sky, and smashes into her face.

Of course, expecting that sort of thing to happen in the real world is...

As I leap out of the corner just now, I accidentally crash into someone and fall on my back. I didn't think I would actually hit someone; I lift my dumbfounded face to the sudden event.

The one I ran into...naturally isn't Candy the fairy, but a woman around the same age as me. She is wearing an orange parka, and is carrying a shopping bag in her hand. It looks like she just finished buying from the shopping district a moment ago, seemingly for a cabbage that is now lying on the street.

"Owww. Onē-san, watch where ya bumpin'." As the lady grumbles in a Kansai dialect, she rolls the cabbage back into her bag and stands up.

"I'm so sorry! I just spaced out..." When I also get up, I take a long hard look at the person's face. Huh? This woman, where have I...

And then, we both yell together with smiling faces.

"MIYUKI!"

"AKANE-CHAN!"

It's a classmate from my time in Nanairogaoka Middle School – Hino Akane-chan. She had transferred schools from Ōsaka one year before me. These days, she is carrying on her dad and mom's business of the okonomiyaki shop, 'Akane'. Back in middle school, when I was trying to ease my anxiety from having switched schools similar to her, she told a witty joke in the homeroom to calm me down. Ever since then, we largely became close friends, always together working on whatever we could during our days at school.

"Akane-chan, you're looking well!"

"Oh, totally well. Like the brilliant sun! Wait, but it's already *night*!" That's just like Akane-chan. Cheerfully sticking to the punchline as usual. "Sheesh... Anyway, 'bout yer thing earlier... Bet it's 'bout 'em wild fairytales, huh?"

"Ehehe. Well, something like that, I suppose."

"Miyuki, at the mo, what're ya doin' for work?"

"I'm working at the nice bookstore in front of the station."

“Front of the station, y’say... Do ya mean the Nanairogaoka Station-Front Bookstore?”

“That’s it!”

“Whoa, I totally didn’t know that! As for me, I’m pretty busy with the shop right now, so I can’t stick ‘round. We’ll head out for some fun next time. Catch ya then!” With the cabbage in her arms, Akane-chan tries to run off before she looks over to my feet and loudly raises her voice. “Ahhh! Miyuki, y’scatterbrain! Ya ain’t pickin’ up that important thing yer ‘bout to drop!?”

“Eh...?” Next thing I know, with a thumping impact, *The Greatest Smile* falls out of the bag. “This is bad! Akane-chan, thank you!”

When picking it up in a hurry, Akane-chan immediately takes the picture book into her hands, opening its pages. “Y’sstill own it, huh! It’s preeetty nostalgic, *The Greatest Smile*...” Akane-chan narrows her eyes fondly at the book upon turning over to the next page.

“Akane-chan, did you remember something?”

“Ain’t that natural, heh! This picture book...guess it’s like a treasure to ya. Tell me ya ain’t been luggin’ it ‘round wherever you’ve been back in middle school, right? More to the point, I’m bettin’ us five’re model protags?”

“Eh...? Five...?”

Akane-chan is flabbergasted as she stares in amazement. “Y’gotta be kiddin’. *Miyuki, me, Yayoi, Nao, Reika* – y’did draw the picture book usin’ us five as models, yeah?”

“Ah, that’s right...” I express a wry smile while scratching the top of my head.

“*Miyuki!* Y’got some nerve, somehow up n’ forgettin’ like that.”

It’s true. I wonder...I wonder how someone like me forgot? In *The Greatest Smile*, one of the five PreCure who makes an appearance is Cure Sunny, modelled after Hino Akane-chan. I borrowed the name and personality from her as they were at the time.

Akane-chan isn’t the only one. Cure Peace’s is Yayoi, Cure March’s is Nao, and even Cure Beauty’s is Reika; they were all modelled after them. They were my classmates and closest friends in Nanairogaoka Middle School, and with them I drew an imaginary story based on the friendship of five girls – that is *The Greatest Smile*. You might even say...this picture book is proof of our friendship. Akane-chan’s eyes glimmer with life as she flips the page.

“It’s sooo nostalgic. Miyuki, this stuff ‘bout fairytales n’ fantasy, I’m lovin’ it for real. Who’d ever thunk that the middle school student Miyuki’d be the girl who came up with *The Greatest Smile*.”

In that instant, I’m struck by a sense of discomfort.

—I came up...? Why did...why did I come up with this story? Why did I model them after my classmates? Then is the PreCure actually...

“Miyuki, have ya met the others lately?”

I shake my head. “I’ve been busy with work, too busy... Yayoi-chan, Nao-chan, and Reika-chan too; I hope everyone is doing well.” Having the five of us meet again...is something I’ve strongly desired. If we best friends were all gathered together, I feel like an *ultra-happy* event would surely happen.

At that moment, Akane-chan leans into my face, so close that the tip of her nose might stick. “Th’heck, why the dull face...! Did somethin’ happen?”

“N-Nothing, really!”

“Wahaa~~ Since it’s comin’ from you anyway, I guess ya started feelin’ down after a screw up at work. Sayin’ things like ‘hap-pup-puu~’, n’ probably puffin’ yer cheeks. I totally get it.”

“It wasn’t like that~! ...Ah, it’s true I was completely late this morning, though.”

“Knew it!” *Thwack!* Akane-chan takes a jab at my chest. “It ain’t all that different from ‘em days in middle school, no? If ya make a worn out face like that, then yer happiness’ll run away. *Smile, smile!*”

As Akane-chan puts on her alluring smile, intuitively I smile back as well. “Akane-chan, thank you.”

“Ahn? What’s up, yer quiet all of a sudden...”

“I’ve been feeling down for a couple of reasons. But thanks to you, Akane-chan, I think I’m feeling a little better.”

Akane-chan breathes an exaggerated sigh on full display. “Haah~~ Still simple-minded like always. Really like the same as back then.”

“Akane-chan, you’re awful~”

All of a sudden, Akane-chan raises her voice in distress. “Ah crap! I got caught standin’ ‘round chattin’ on the spot ‘ere! I’m holdin’ up the customers!” As Akane-chan stomps away, she returns *The Greatest Smile* back to me. “Y’gotta come ‘round to eat at our shop next time! Classmate discount, best bud discount, nostalgic reunion discount... Whatever y’like, I’ll service ya!”

“Really!? I’ll go, I’ll go! I’ll definitely go someday!”

“Look forward to my okonomiyaki, ‘cus it’s pipin’ hot n’ mouth-waterin’! Well, catch ya later!” When Akane-chan breaks into a sprint, she disappears into the surging crowd in the blink of an eye.

I put *The Greatest Smile* away in my bag, and start walking.

Akane-chan...she hasn't changed one bit. Always the brilliant sun, making everybody cheerful and upbeat with her unseen mysterious power. Even back in middle school, she helped me out so many times that I lost count. Akane-chan was really shining bright like Cure Sunny.

*Right! I won't get discouraged, either.*

To reunite with Akane-chan on such timing by pure chance, it's like a miracle. *Miracles...only happen in stories...* That's what the store manager said, but this just proves that a miracle can happen even in my ordinary life. For the Nanairogaoka Station-Front Bookstore that has been doomed to be closed, maybe a miracle can happen.

I need to take some time to think through ways for the bookstore to keep going somehow. For the sake of Yoshimi-chan, for the sake of the customers who love the bookstore... Even if that's impossible, for all of next month, as long as business at the Nanairogaoka Station-Front Bookstore continues, I will put my utmost effort into it as an honest employee of the store until the very last day. If I see everyone off day-after-day with a smile, I know a bright future will undoubtedly be waiting.

~~~~~

The next day, I wait at the bookstore throughout the whole time, but Yoshimi-chan doesn't show up. Not being able to see her smiling face is a lonely experience, and while organising the bookshelves, I unconsciously glance toward *Kids Connect Square*. But on the next day, and the day after that...Yoshimi-chan still doesn't show up.

I wonder if something happened to her?

In the store, with a notice informing that we'll be closing by the end of next month, the guests pause with looks of astonishment upon seeing it. Feeling disappointed over the closure, they ask, "Is it really true?" and call out to me. Each time they would ask, my heart aches.

On the evening of the fifth day after the decision to close was made, Yoshimi-chan's mom visits the store. Thinking that Yoshimi-chan is also together with her, I immediately respond with a smile. However, the girl isn't there. Her mom bows with a mournful expression.

"Sorry to bother you in the middle of work."

"It's fine. Um, is Yoshimi-chan...?"

When I ask, the mother tells me about the situation: she says that ever since Yoshimi-chan heard from her mom that the store would be closing, it shocked her. *"The cool bookstore's gonna be gone...I won't be able to see Onē-chan with The Greatest Smile..."*

It seems after saying all that, she started crying... Since then, at the kindergarten and even at home, she has been constantly depressed and has been reading picture books all by herself. This subject matter...I thought it would be rude to discuss this with you so I didn't tell you until now, but...I just don't know what to do..."

"Is that so...?"

The place she has loved up until now will be gone. Just thinking of Yoshimi-chan's shock...makes it feel like my heart is going to break, too.

I ask the mother without hesitation. "Would it be possible for me to see Yoshimi-chan?"

~~~~~

As soon as I get the store manager's permission to finish work early, I decide to intrude on Yoshimi-chan's home.

Her house, it's in a quiet residential area close to the district in front of the station. The building itself is a stylish and compact two-storey rental house that looks exactly like something straight out of a picture book world. I've been told that the father is busy with work, the mother sets out during part of the day, and they live together with Yoshimi-chan as their only child. When I stare at that little house, it nostalgically reminds me of the home I used to live in long, long ago before moving to Nanairogaoka.

When I enter the household, I head towards the kid's room on the second floor to see her. And now, I knock on the old-fashioned door. "...Yoshimi-chan? It's me – Onē-chan from the nice bookstore." No reply. "I heard from your mom...that you weren't feeling well, and so I got worried. Won't you open up for a bit?"

"...Onē-chan's a liar..."

I hear a faint voice from the other side of the door. It's a voice that seems to fade away, but there's no doubt it's Yoshimi-chan's voice. She's probably sitting with her back against the door inside. I'm sure of it. "Yoshimi-chan..." Interrupting my words, Yoshimi-chan's voice continues.

"Miyuki-onēchan, even though you promised you would always be waiting for me... Even though, I believed in Onē-chan... The cool bookstore's...gonna be gone, isn't it?" Yoshimi-chan has a tearful voice.

I try my hardest to answer in a cheerful tone. "I never told you...how happy I was. The way you came to love the wonderful bookstore and *The Greatest Smile* picture book so much like that... The way you would go into the store almost every day, and come to see me... That's why, when I thought about how I didn't want Yoshimi-chan to be upset, and whether the nice bookstore could keep going, I tried to see if I could speak to the store manager about it. I want to keep the bookstore going, too. The fun in picture books and fantasy, I want even more people to know about them. But you see, the loss

of the bookstore...has already been decided. So I want to see you at that shop, Yoshimi-chan, until the end of next month.”

Beyond the door, I can hear the sound of Yoshimi-chan sniffing.

“But you know, I...gave it some thought. Even if the wonderful bookstore is gone, even if *Kids Connect Square* is also gone, the story of *The Greatest Smile* won’t be over. It’s up to you, Yoshimi-chan – because from now on, you can keep it going forever...” I’m not sure if she understands the meaning of what I’m saying, but Yoshimi-chan is being quiet about it. “I...understand very well how Yoshimi-chan feels. These days I talk with lots of different customers at the bookstore, but when Onē-chan was little, I was shy too. I couldn’t even talk to my friends at all by myself.”

“Miyuki-onēchan, you too...?”

Much to my surprise, Yoshimi-chan’s voice does a turnaround.

“Yeah. However, on one summer day, I met a mysterious girl...who changed my fate.” Grabbing her attention, I narrate to Yoshimi-chan about that little memory.

~~~~~

That summer, with Dad busy at work, it was decided I would stay over at Grandma’s house for a short while. But when she couldn’t stand and watch as I did nothing but read picture books all alone indoors, Grandma gave me a hand-mirror, and she said:

“Miyuki, they say good fortune comes to those who smile. If you smile, I know something fun will come to you.”

While fiddling with that hand-mirror, I felt my courage strangely well up, and decided to play outside. And then, I met her – the first friend in my life...

It was a sweet girl with an impressively sparkling, shining smile. I still don’t remember her name to this day, but it was a mystical experience, an event you could possibly say was the very beginning for me.

I named the girl *Smile-chan*. Back then, I even drew in a picture book about the meeting and experience. During my time in vocational college, the work that got chosen as an honourable mention for the Tōdō Izumi Fairytale Grand Prize, *The Secret of Smile-chan*, was modelled after her in the making of the fairy tale.

Smile-chan...I wonder where she is, and what she’s doing now. I’m not even sure if that experience was a miracle caused by the hand-mirror Grandma gave me, or whether Smile-chan truly ever existed in the first place...

~~~~~

“I’m here now, thanks to the girl I met that day... If you can be brave with a smile and move forward one step at a time, a twinkling and shining future will be waiting for you. Can I see Yoshimi-chan be brave and move forward one step at a time, too?”

Evidently, I can hear the girl holding her breath on the other side of the door.

“The story of *The Greatest Smile* – I want you to tell it to all your friends at kindergarten.”

“Me tell...?”

“Yeah. If you ever feel and go ‘So much fun!’ like that, I want you to tell it to everyone around you. If you can share your happiness with the people close to you, if you can make everyone smile, wouldn’t that make you truly *ultra-happy*?”

“Me, do that...”

I interrupt Yoshimi-chan’s fading voice. “You can do it. I could do it back then, too. The story of *The Greatest Smile* might end there, but wouldn’t it be nice for you to keep it going, Yoshimi-chan?”

“I should...?”

“There are five PreCure introduced in this story, however, I almost certainly believe they aren’t the only five. Just like the main character Miyuki, if you always smile, then I’m sure happy things will be waiting for you. Not just normal happy things – *ultra-happy* things. As long as you have the power of imagination, the story will go on forever and ever. If you love picture books, Yoshimi-chan, then I know you can do it. Someday, I want you to tell Onē-chan...the sequel you came up with for *The Greatest Smile*.”

~~~~~

On that day, I never get to see Yoshimi-chan in person. The locked door to the kid’s room never opened.

Nevertheless, my heart is filled with a mysterious happiness. While I was desperately talking to get Yoshimi-chan to open her heart, my words violently shook my own. Although I couldn’t put my faith in the power of stories, before I knew it, a glimmer of hope began to shine within. The words I told to Yoshimi-chan – everything I said was also a lesson to myself. Maybe, it was possible to say such things at that point because I was able to reunite with Akane-chan, and was able to share in the extraordinary happiness.

No matter what kind of life humans may live, happiness will come to them. As long as you muster just a little courage, you can move forward one step at a time with a smile... I know Yoshimi-chan can do it, too. After all, she was able to summon her bravery and talk to me back at *Kids Connect Square*...

The story of *The Greatest Smile*...is not yet over. It will continue from now on. As long as we keep believing...

~~~~~

That night, I have a strange dream.

In the dream, I'm back at my time in middle school. On the first day of my school transfer, thinking that I'm going to be late, I run down the street leading to Nanairogaoka Middle School. As soon as I round the corner, I expect the arrival of my Prince Charming, but no-one is there.

Just as I'm about to walk away feeling disappointed, I see something flapping its wings to fly in the sky.

It's a book, and as I look at it dumbfounded, from inside that picture book appears the fairy Candy who crashes into my face. Candy, still a very young girl, said she is searching for the legendary PreCure for the sake of her mission, before disappearing from my presence.

...Huh? Is this the story of *The Greatest Smile*? Does that mean I'm actually experiencing this in my own dream? No, it's just a dream, so maybe it's not right to say that I'm really experiencing it...

The dream moves forward in time, to the morning homeroom. As the new transfer student, I nervously make my introduction with teeth chattering and body frozen stiff. Akane-chan gets up from her seat, telling a joke to calm me down. In class, I can also see Yayoi-chan, Nao-chan, and Reika-chan.

There's no doubt about it. I...I've become the main protagonist of *The Greatest Smile*!

And now after school, as I'm exploring inside, I go to the library room. While shifting the books around, I get sucked into the bookshelf...

~~~~~

...then I wake up. My whole body is sweaty, and my heart is beating violently. It was a dream so vivid that it felt like it was totally real.

I wonder if...if it's because I've been reading *The Greatest Smile* picture book every day? On the day before, when I visited Yoshimi-chan's home, I wonder if it's because I was constantly thinking about the book itself?

It's still gloomy outside – it's around this time that parts of the sky should begin lighting up.

When I get up out from bed, I gaze at *The Greatest Smile* left on the desk. The handmade picture book, it almost looks mystical being bathed in the faint natural light shining in from the gap between the curtains. The day that I made this book was, if I remember correctly, from my time as a 2nd-year middle school student around...oh right, roughly ten years ago.

Driven by nostalgia, I take out my school graduation album from the bookshelf. In the group photo of Nanairogaoka Middle School's Class 3-2, in addition to me, there's my classmates Akane-chan, Kise Yayoi-chan, Midorikawa Nao-chan, and Aoki Reika-chan, with both their names and photographs. I drew *The Greatest Smile* with the introduction of the PreCure being modelled after my companions. We were together as five close friends tackling whatever we did. Although...

Huh? I gaze at the girls' portraits a little harder.

We should have spent a great deal of time together, but despite trying to recall the moments we spent every day, a fog vaguely hangs over them. At any rate, Akane-chan, she...I had forgotten she even existed until we unexpectedly reunited on that street corner the other day. How could I have so easily forgotten the life of my very best friend?

As I flip through the pages of my graduation album, I desperately try to pull on the thread in my mind. There, in the printed photographs of memories, were the names that had been written down— "Hoshizora Miyuki", "Hino Akane", "Kise Yayoi", "Midorikawa Nao", "Aoki Reika". Yes, the five of us were definitely there. As pupils of Nanairogaoka Middle School, we lived out our irreplaceable days together.

And yet...why?

Why...why did I completely forget about these four girls until recently? Why does it make my heart hurt when I try to remember them?

Our time in middle school...what in the world happened back then?

At that moment, I hear a voice from somewhere in the room. At first, I thought I was hallucinating and was hearing things because the voice was so small.

"...PreCure...where are you ~kuru?..." It sounds like a little girl asking for help. When I listen closely, it's not a hallucination; it's clear the voice is real. "...PreCure! ...Help ~kuru!..." Overwhelmed by surprise, I let out an 'Eek!' sound. Don't tell me, did I hear the mystery voice come from *The Greatest Smile* picture book itself just then...? It couldn't have...

I walk up to the book, nervously opening it to see its pages. The voice I heard up until a second ago, it seems to have vanished. "...Who's there? Who is it...?" Although I realise it is unlikely anyone will answer, I ask anyway. And then, I open to another once more.

"...Miyuki~!..." This time, there is no doubt that it called my name. It can't be...

On that page, there is a sketch of Candy the fairy. In order to find the legendary warriors PreCure, and for the sake of her mission of restoring peace to Märchenland, the fairy came to this world. She's a girl who loves fashion, and has an older brother named Pop... Of course, she's just a fantasy character I made up back in my days at middle school.

The mystery voice I've been hearing recently, it belongs to Candy. Regardless if she's just a character in a picture book, I'm convinced. "...Candy...?" I talk to her. But, Candy doesn't reply. However, I feel like the sketch in the book faintly begins to move. "Candy?! Candy, is that you?!" I feel I've fully become like Hoshizora Miyuki within the picture book, calling out Candy's name. If so, then my voice should be able to reach her inside that same place.

Candy in the picture book is desperately crying for help. If that's the case, then there's no way I wouldn't help.

Before long, a new miracle awakens.

From the gap of the bookshelf in my room, a dim light surges through. The shelf is tightly packed with my favourite fairytales and picture books. And with the empty space where I took out the graduation album just moments ago, a mystical light overflows from the other side of that point.

The light makes my eyes twinkle.

This warm glow...I remember it from a long time ago – it's nostalgic. But, I can't see what's past the light, on the other side of the bookshelf.

"...Miyuki~!..." And then, that's when I noticed. Candy's voice is coming from the other side of the shelf!

It's not from over here.

When I impulsively walk up to it, I slide the books away to peek through to the other end of the gap. However, even when I look closely by forcing my head into the shelf, I can't see anything on the other side. I keep on sliding the books.

Suddenly, I'm struck by a sense of familiarity. *Déjà vu*. This exact thing...I've experienced this before back as a middle school student.

Relying on my memories, I slide the books into place like a puzzle: First, the books on the top row to the right. Then, the books on the bottom row to the left. And now, the books on the top row again in both directions at the same time... Even though nobody taught me, I'm confident this is how it's done. I am sure, without a doubt, a miracle is happening. That's what I believe...

While sliding the books, I come to a realisation. How did I not notice until now, I wonder?

Miyuki, the main protagonist that I made up in *The Greatest Smile*, was sucked into the bookshelf while sliding the library room's books in this manner. On the other side is a thrilling alternate dimension, and that realm is connected to bookshelves around the world. That's...nothing more than a setting I came up for the story. Nevertheless, I do not doubt what I believe anymore.

Candy is looking for help. She's looking for the legendary warriors, PreCure. Then in that case, there's no reason to hesitate.

I make a wish – I want to go to Candy. I want to jump inside *The Greatest Smile* picture book, so I can begin the sequel to the story. I'm almost certain that a few days ago, the me back then would have never believed in something like this. But now, I'm different. Ever since I visited Yoshimi-chan's home and her closed spirit, ever since our little talk, I can feel the glimmer of hope in my heart.

The Nanairogaoka Station-Front Bookstore will be closing soon. The place to connect with Yoshimi-chan will be gone. Like in the stories, there is a beginning...and there is an end.

On the other hand, there are also stories that never end. As long as you muster your courage, and as long as you move forward one step at a time with a smile, a new page will unfold. I want to live the continuation of *The Greatest Smile*. Like Hoshizora Miyuki in the picture book, like Cure Happy, if I'm always smiling, I know *ultra-happy* things will happen.

Because I...I...

The brightness emitting from inside the bookshelf is intensifying with radiance. It's a warm, nostalgic light.

In the next instant, my body is enveloped in light...and I get sucked into the bookshelf.

*

Chapter 2 – Hino Akane

Do ya remember...the taste o' first love?

The first love in yer life, first love...haah, the way it squeezes yer heart, the sound o' that sure feels nice. The bittersweet aroma o' lemon's a bit cliché, but I guess that's what most folks say it is. 'Sides that, it can smell like mint, smell like shampoo, smell like milk tea; that's the way it kinda feels for different people. There's all sorts o' lives; all sorts o' love, too. The taste o' first love's said to 'ave 'bout infinite varieties.

Eh? First love ain't got a taste, y'say? 'ave ya forgotten 'bout way back when so soon? Ya sayin' ya don't fall in love anymore? Stupid! Only somebody with no sense o' romance would say that. I'm 'ere to 'ave a serious talk 'bout love, but ya rude folks had to put a damper on that, huh.

Ah? What's with those eyes? How'd my first love go? I see. Y'wanna...hear my story? I see, I see. If yer gonna go that far, then I'll hafta tell ya. 'Ere are the FACTS...'bout hot-blooded Hino Akane's first love life.

Ahn? What's that? Ya ain't got no particular interest in hearin' me fawn over it?

Hahaha, well that's *too bad*. In this book's second chapter, I, Hino Akane, am the main protagonist. However sick o' it ya get or whether ya start givin' me the stink eye, I get to talk 'bout whatever I want so ya better brace yerself. I ain't got much o' a way with words or anythin', so pay no mind to my rough accent.

Just hearin' it brings me to tears; even talkin' 'bout it brings me to tears. Goin' ten years back, it was 'round my time as a 2nd-year in middle school – the taste o' my very first love, it tasted like okonomiyaki...

"Akane-chan, can I have a mixed tempura?"

"Akane-chaan, a refill on oolong highball over here."

"Akane-chaaaan~! Akane-chan, hey!"

"SHADDAP! I'm tellin' a serious story 'ere! Can't ya hush n' listen!?"

...Ahn? Ahahahaha...sorry, my bad. I totally forgot I'm workin' right now.

"I'll get 'em ready right away, fellas, just give me a quick minute. A mixed tempura for 'im, n' an oolong highball for 'im, yeah? What 'bout ya over there? Eh? Y'just usin' ya free time to chat? ...HEY, make up yer mind n' order somethin'!"

~~~~~

"Thanks for stoppin' by~ Come back again, guys!" Ahh, I'm beat. A day's work sure does a real hard number on yer shoulders, stiff n' all.



Business at the okonomiyaki joint *Akane* has been thrivin' lately as usual – every day it's been bustlin' with activity. With Dad in the hospital for his back pain, n' Mom swamped bein' president o' the neighbourhood association, I'm left handlin' n' servin' food at the shop as manager in their place. My lil' bro Genki's off at a trainin' camp with his university's Soccer Club, so he's been away from home for ages now. With all that said, I ain't had a choice but to show off my talents. Well, the only ones comin' to the shop are the usual regulars, tho'. It'd be nice to widen the customer base, but I'm guessin' I wouldn't know how to deal with that kinda businessy stuff for runnin' things 'round 'ere.

Uhh, how far did I end up talkin'? What 'aven't I mentioned yet? Oh yeah, I was talkin' 'bout my first love. Goin' ten years back from now, it was 'round my time as a 2<sup>nd</sup>-year in middle school.

Nanairogaoka...betcha it sounds awesome. From Ōsaka, I got transferred n' came to this town's middle school 11 years ago. My father Daigo, my mother Masako, me, n' my lil' brother Genki. With a family o' four n' their Kansai-styled okonomiyaki shop *Akane* together, we moved into Nanairogaoka.

By the way, wanna know why the okonomiyaki shop's named after me? Based on what Dad n' Mom told me, it's 'cus they opened the shop 'round the year I was born. Sheesh, say whatever ya want 'bout their cute lil' daughter, but to call the shop after their daughter's own name...? My parents must've been pretty dumb.

~~~~~

The guy who's my first love...was an exchange student from England.

His name's Brian Taylor. He had glasses n' blond hair, n' even tho' he was a pretty good-lookin' mate, he had *"it's all right"* printed in weird Japanese on the shirt he's wearin', so at first I was like *'Th'heck? What a weirdo'*. But, I ended up bein' picked to show 'im 'round the school, n' that's when we got along. I ain't gonna lie when I say my English's very bad, but thanks to Brian bein' able to speak juuust a lil' Japanese, we managed to communicate in one way or another.

Brian was super nice n' he had that dreamy smile o' his. He's incredibly interested in Japanese culture; he also happened to be a gentleman complete with a casual 'ladies first' attitude. Also when he tried out the okonomiyaki I made, he would 'ave the biggest smile. Plus when Brian was studyin' in Japan, I taught 'im all sorts o' stuff. N' when I saw his smile, my heart would pound like crazy, n' it's up to this part 'ere where I'd get all happy...

The thoughts o' me bein' romantically in love n' stuff...guess I didn't know any better as an innocent gal back then. I didn't really recognise 'em, I didn't recognise what I felt for Brian. However, my friends helped clue me in. My feelings toward 'im...but my no-good butt couldn't properly spill the beans. The hot-blooded gal o' the brilliant sun, Hino Akane, hopelessly kept quiet n' kept away...

Since Brian was studyin' abroad for the short-term, soon he had to go home to England. On the day he's headin' back, I rushed to the airport in order to tell 'im how I felt. My friends even lent me a hand, n' I was able to tell Brian what was on my mind.

My friends really helped out big time. Without 'em, I wouldn't 'ave been able to tell Brian 'bout my feelings, or even reunite with 'im afterwards.

So yeah...the romantic love 'tween me n' Brian, that was only the beginnin'.

Once Brian was back in England, he'd send me letters. 'Course, they were all in English so they were a real pain to read, tho' I managed to crack 'em, n' even wrote my answers back in broken English. There're stories 'bout love overcomin' the language barrier... I've heard o' 'em, but it's still rough when ya don't understand the words. Me, I studied English extra hard. I'd only ever failed in English before, but by my 3rd-year in middle school I was picked out as Class Representative for the English speech contest.

N' so I graduated from middle school, n' became a high school student. Before long, the amount o' letters with Brian became fewer n' fewer, n' bit-by-bit we forgot to stay in touch – oops. Keepin' a long-distance relationship going's a tough nut to crack after all.

But when the time summer break for my 2nd-year in high school came 'round, I reached a turnin' point.

One day, suddenly my dad faced me head-on n' gave me an order. "Akane, yer okonomiyaki skills're still *half-baked*. Ya ain't got enough trainin', not enough to take over this shop. So listen 'ere – yer goin' to England to expand yer skills. Go n' cook up okonomiyaki that'll make the tongues o' the English folk *ROAR*. N' don't come back 'til that comes true!"

Haah? Dad, what ya said's undoubtedly dumb, was what I'd thunk.

My skills're half-baked? Ain't got enough trainin'? N' despite sayin' before that I couldn't even be relied on, outta nowhere he's tellin' me to go to England? "I don't getcha. Ya one o' those oni coaches who show up in hot-blooded sports manga?"

"Y'idiot! *'If ya love yer kids, send 'em out into the world'* – that sorta sayin', y'know! If I tell ya to go, ya GO!"

I really felt the hurt comin', so I talked back without thinkin'. "Fine! I accept yer challenge! I'll be havin' the English folk smackin' their lips over my okonomiyaki masterpiece: The *'Akane Special – England Edition'*! I WILL make it happen! Dad, ya just wait for yer bad back to slowly heal!"

"Oh! N' definitely don't expect me to lend yah a hand!"

“Who’d ever ask anythin’ for yer help!?” Now that I think back on it, wonder why I didn’t realise it at the time? Why *England* o’ all places...is what I’d get by thinkin’ ‘bout it for just a teeny-tiny lil’ bit, usually... Man, I sure was an idiot, huh.

~~~~~

Anyways, I went to England. Carryin’ an okonomiyaki griddle on my back, it was the start o’ my okonomiyaki trainin’ in the city o’ London.

Altho’, the trip had its ups n’ downs. Suddenly at the airport, some guys yelled “*drop the griddle on your back*” n’ then got me to stop – missin’ the plane was the start o’ my hardships. Once I finally got to London, the next second I got lost, n’ to add insult to injury, my wallet n’ passport were **STOLEN**. I never even made it to the hotel I’d booked to stay in, n’ there was nobody to rely on. Even I was just ‘bout to throw up my hands n’ start cryin’ over how messed up things were.

“No, if I get crushed ‘ere, Dad’ll laugh at me. I’ll show ‘im! I gotta get serious!” Psychin’ myself up, I spread my griddle out on the streets o’ London, n’ decided to cook up some okonomiyaki to earn my keep. “‘ERE, ‘ERE! GATHER ‘ROUND, FEAST YER EYES! *Jisu izu Japanīzu okonomiyaki! Ittsu berrī derishasu! Kamon!*”

The Hino family secret technique – after puttin’ on a show by demonstratin’ the arm-twistin’ special, the people walkin’ down the streets o’ London seemed to look my way with curious eyes. But, everyone circlin’ nearby only watched n’ nobody would step any closer. The folks weren’t comin’ to buy.

Was it ‘cus my English was broken? Was it ‘cus they didn’t know what okonomiyaki was? They ain’t comin’ even tho’ I was a cute gal puttin’ on the one-woman show o’ her life, **SO WHAT GIVES!?**

I grew desperate, so I chose to show off some secret tricks. Spreadin’ the okonomiyaki ingredients long n’ narrow on the griddle’s surface, I made it into the shape o’ a tower. The passers-by at this point started showin’ interest in what the heck was bein’ served. “Ta-daah! Hino Akane’s deluxe, okonomiyaki-made, **EIFFEL TOWER!** ...Hang on, that’s *Paris!* This here’s London, ain’t it!?”

Altho’ they saw my one-woman boke n’ tsukkomi routine, ‘part from the folks givin’ confused stares, not one person let out so much as a laugh. Why...why was it bombin’...?

*Aahh, hell! Ain’t nobody in London’s gonna understand Japanese. Why didn’t I think o’ that sooner? Uhh, how to say all that in English right now... AH, the customers’re gettin’ bored n’ leavin’! Not only that, but it’s lookin’ like the sun’s already settin’. It’s no good...I’ve ran outta ideas. I shoulda known that travellin’ to train alone...was reckless...*

I gave up; that’s when I was about to cry for real soon after. But then outta the blue, I heard a certain familiar voice open up.

“Okonomiyaki, please give one piece.”

Some broken Japanese. I was stunned when I raised my noggin, n’ saw that nostalgic face. *No way...there’s no way in this lil’ corner in the vast city o’ London that I’d dream we’d see each other again.* Altho’ it’s cliché, I’d imagined in that moment it was the Red String o’ Fate’s handiwork. “BRIAN...!”

Brian took a huge bite outta my okonomiyaki, n’ smiled a sweetly smile. “Akane, this really delicious. Guess you still improved.”

I put on a smile o’ relief while sayin’, “*Thanks...*”, in the bestest way I could.

~~~~~

From that day on, I chose to get accepted for a homestay in Brian’s house, n’ my okonomiyaki trainin’ kicked off with a start. Brian gave me a tour ‘round the city o’ London, n’ even gave me a crash course on English. We even got to collaborate together to do a stage show in sellin’ okonomiyaki. As for me, I got to make remarkable progress in my skills outta it. I’d caught the hearts o’ the folks in London, n’ gradually more soon came down to chomp on okonomiyaki.

Brian would be in the middle o’ studyin’ in the London High School, but even then he’d still think ‘bout me.

That’s when I realised. When Dad told me to go to London, it hadn’t been out on a whim. It’s ‘cus Brian was there. I bet he must’ve known how I thought ‘bout Brian, so he gave my back a proper shove. Sheesh, if that was really the case, then he shoulda just said so from the start... Well, I *was* an idiot for not havin’ realised it sooner, tho’.

In one entire month o’ summer break, the time tacklin’ my okonomiyaki trainin’ in London, n’ my time spent with Brian, became an irreplaceable treasure to me. Every single day was super excitin’ n’ fun; I got so many memories outta it.

On the day I had to fly back to Japan, Brian came to the airport to see me off.

What a nostalgic thing that was. When I was a middle-schooler, *I* went to the airport to see ‘im off. This time, our positions were reversed. “Brian, *thank you*. I...if I hadn’t ran into ya on the way, everythin’ would’ve absolutely been frustratin’. Ya don’t know how many times yer smile helped me out.”

Brian answered with an extraordinary smile. “To see Akane’s smile again, makes me happy too. Back when Akane was a middle school student, you taught me a lot, about Japan. For that, I am grateful.”

While lookin’ at Brian’s smile, it made sayin’ farewell for me all the more painful.

When I was hesitate to leave, Brian hugged me tight. It was so sudden, I’d almost stopped breathin’.

What's up with this... It's like we're both total weirdos...

Brian let go o' my body n' spoke. "Akane, I am certain we will meet again. Because I have been thinking of studying overseas at a university in Japan."

"For real!?" I was so happy that my voice cracked.

"I have been interested in studying Japanese language and Japanese culture, so I have been thinking of taking the Japanese university exam. Someday I would like to become experienced in working as a bridge between England and Japan. It seems like this desire developed so strongly...because I met you, Akane. Will you wait...for me?"

"Course I will! This makes me incredibly happy!" Brian n' I promised to meet again in Japan, n' said our farewells at the airport.

Once I got back to Japan, I relayed to Dad 'bout the whole story. Next, I cooked up a sample o' okonomiyaki for 'im. Dad was sorta satisfied with the taste, n' with a bold face he had this to say:

"Fuhm, ya've improved yer skills. However, that alone ain't enough. Ya gotta grow up as a woman, too."

Me then...I felt the hurt arrive. "SHEESH, TH'HECK'S THE BIG DEAL...!"

"Whatcha spoutin' with that cheeky mouth when yer father's dishin' out praise!?"

"I don't care 'bout gettin' yer impossible approval, so whatever!"

"Ahhh, that so! In that case, y'all hafta make a fresh start once again!"

...was what I got, with Dad bein' the same as usual. Well, it's all thanks to 'im that I was able to meet Brian again, so guess I had to be grateful, huh.

How's Dad after that? Still complainin' 'bout his back. Serves 'im right.

~~~~~

N' those were the facts o' my hot-blooded first love life. That's why, while I think first love's got all sorts o' tastes, mine tasted like okonomiyaki.

...Eh? After that, whatever happened with Brian? How did our romantic love pay off? Doesn't that story sound way too good to be true?

Shaddap! What, ya think I'm spewin' nonsense from my mouth or somethin'?

"Akane, I'm home~!"

Oh? Looks like he's back just in time. *Good timing*; lemme properly introduce 'im to y'all! "Brian, welcome back~"

“Akane, what were you mumbling to yourself about?”

“Hahaha...just now, I was thinkin’ back on that point ‘bout our fated reunion.”

“About your okonomiyaki training, correct?”

“Right! Pretty nostalgic times, huh...”

“Were it not for that reunion, I wouldn’t be here now. Every day I get to dine on Akane’s okonomiyaki, so I’m the happiest man in the world.”

“C’mon, Brian, yer embarrassin’ me~” ...n’ with that said, comes our lovey-dovey ways...do ya get the picture now?

Eh? Ya don’t? Sheesh, aren’t ya dense. Y’tthink it oughta go without sayin’ to understand.

Brian, at the mo, is studyin’ abroad at a Japanese university. For four years since he came to Japan, he’s been goin’ through a homestay with me. At uni he’s learnin’ ‘bout Japanese cuisines, n’ on his days off from lectures or when he’s got free time at night, he’d naturally help me out with the work at the shop too. Brian, the two o’ us under one roof, make the okonomiyaki joint thrive every day.

When it came to cookin’ okonomiyaki, I taught ‘im the ropes. Thanks to that, lately he even as far as mastered the arm-twistin’ special o’ the Hino family secret technique. As for Brian’s self-made okonomiyaki, there’s a subtle difference from my Kansai-style with a more western-style charm to it, but it’s nice.

“Only four years n’ ya’ve got the taste down perfect; yer quite talented for sure.” Even Dad, who had that much to say ‘bout Brian, found to be pretty fond o’ ‘im.

Eh? Me n’ Brian’s relationship? Whoa, is this embarrassin’. But since ya waited so long, I’ll tell ya. Keep it a secret from everybody, okay? ‘Cus I ain’t even talked to Brian himself ‘bout it yet.

See, once Brian graduates university, I’m probably gonna do *that* – A proportion...? Promotion...? That ain’t it. Uhh, p...p...

Y’moron! I shouldn’t end up all tense n’ forgetful!

Eh? *PreCure*? Naahh. Pretty sure it only starts with a ‘P’, tho’.

It’s *propose*. A confession. *CON-FES-SION*!

I’m thinkin’ o’ tellin’ Brian how I truly feel. I wanna stay with Brian forever – I wanna get married. It’s my dream for the two o’ us from ‘ere on out to make this shop thrive forever. My dad n’ mom are always fightin’, but they always smile n’ seem incredibly happy. I wanna ‘ave a family o’ smiles where we never stop like that, too.

I wonder what Brian will think? Wonder how he'll accept 'em 'xactly, 'bout my feelings? Wonder if he'll hate 'em? Oh geez, oh geez. Nothin'll get started if I dilly-dally over it. I gotta take a chance on romantic love. We've already been together for four years now, so I think we can settle it 'ere.

I wanna be happy with Brian, just the two o' us. Always like the brilliant sun, n' with hot-blooded power we'll even overcome whatever hardships that come our way. Because I...I... Aah, I forgot what I was 'bout to say. But anyways, I'll make good on my word. Here's hopin' ...that my confession'll be a success!

~~~~~

Wahaa... Wahaa...

I can only let out a sigh right now.

Wahaa... Wahaa...ughu, UUGHU!

Uwah, thought I was dyin' there. I was sighin' so much, I forgot to breathe.

Eh? What happened? It's nothin' really, even if you wanna hear it... Nothin' I do is gonna do any good anyways. Chapter two's over.

...Ahn? There're still pages left? Yer worried? *You*, gettin' all worried 'bout someone like *me*? Well, aren't ya kind. Then I guess it's worth tellin' ya. Maybe talkin' 'bout it for a short while'll make me feel better.

A'right, I'll talk. Listen good – 'ere are the facts o' Hino Akane's hot-blooded, broken love life... Oh, I just let the endin' slip.

Well, I thought I'd work up the courage to confess – tell 'im straight 'bout my feelings. I was ready to face 'im n' give it a shot. But y'know, goin' ahead with it broke my heart. Hino Akane o' the brilliant sun in the sky's feelin' all down n' gloomy.

Later on, I went to Brian's room. On the second floor o' my shop, there's this empty room, so I felt like lendin' it to 'im four years back.

Tho' I knocked on the room's slidin' door, I got no answer. "Brian? Ya got a minute?" I called out, but there was no answer like before. It was weird. The time was almost 'round past midnight. He should've been in his room. I was sure I heard the sound o' footsteps o' 'im headin' upstairs after comin' home just several minutes ago.

Plus, the lights in the room were comin' through a gap in the slidin' door. Brian was definitely in his room. "Brian...?" No answer again. *What happened?* I thought.

I got nervous, so I softly opened the slidin' door to check. I don't usually barge into Brian's room whenever I want. I knew it was bad n' all, but I got worried somethin' worse had happened to Brian's wellbein'.

His room's 'bout the size o' six tatami mats, with a study desk n' a bed. The curtains hadn't been closed, so outside the window I could vaguely spot the streetlights o' the Nanairogaoka shoppin' district. The fluorescent lamp filled the room with light. At first glance, I didn't see anythin' resemblin' Brian.

"Brian...?" I took a step inside the room. Then, I saw 'im.

Brian was layin' on top o' the bed, takin' faint breaths in his nap. *Brian...he's already fallen asleep.* He'd only came upstairs a few minutes ago; guess he was just that tired. He went to uni in his clothes durin' the whole day, n' 'ere he was sound asleep wearin' the same set.

"Geez...y'all're gonna catch a cold." I put the cover that was 'bout to slip outta bed on Brian. He was mumblin' somethin' in his sleep sorta, but didn't show any signs o' wakin' up.

I remember. This week, Brian had his university exams, so he'd been studyin' 'til late at night every day. Today was the last day for it, for the exam. Now that all his tests were over, he could finally put his brain to rest n' went back to his room to sleep.

Brian's study desk caught my eye. There were loads o' stuff like Japanese textbooks n' notes stacked in a pile. *Brian...he sure studied hard, huh.* Lately I even remembered hearin' words I knew nothin' 'bout, what with 'im speakin' Japanese so fluently.

Well, it's all good. I don't hafta tell 'im 'bout how I feel, so long as it ain't for tonight, yeah. Tomorrow, I can take my time confessin'.

After a lil' while o' watchin' Brian's sleepin' face, I tiptoed a good distance away from the bed, n' turned off the fluorescent lamp in the room. THAT was the moment.

On the desk, I noticed that his notebook computer had been left open. On the PC's screen, it showed an image o' his email inbox. Normally I didn't think I oughta take a look. But I happened to accidentally catch a glimpse.

I walked up to the computer without thinkin'. At the very top o' the inbox on-screen, I saw this email. The whole thing was in English, but ever since my trainin' in England I also mastered English in a way, so I could just barely understand what it meant. On that email, it had this as its subject:

—'London Japanese Language School – Regarding your passing of the Lecturer Acceptance Exam.'

Eh...? I did a double-take at the screen.

London Japanese Language School? Passing the Lecturer Acceptance Exam?

This...email got sent to Brian, no doubt. A London Japanese Language School...as in a school in London...? The text in the email, it's got this sentence:

—‘Dear Brian Taylor, you have passed the lecturer acceptance exam of this school.’

Ehh? He passed? What’s it on ‘bout? I...I’ve never heard ‘im talk ‘bout this...

“Akane...?”

Behind me was Brian’s voice, so I turned ‘round to face ‘im at a loss for words. Brian, who had fallen asleep, woke up without me noticin’ n’ was sittin’ on the bed starin’ at me hard. Spottin’ the computer on the desk, his expression stiffened. Seein’ Brian make that kind of face...was a first for me. “Brian...wh-what’s with this email...?”

Brian didn’t answer. As he tried to pick his words, nothing on his mind could help ‘im not slump his face.

“I know I shouldn’t ‘ave just come in yer room whenever I wanted...n’ I know lookin’ at yer computer’s bad without permission... But, what’s this *‘London Japanese Language School’*?”

Brian kept quiet for a short while, but he began speakin’ as if hopin’ to persuade me. “I’m sorry for keeping it quiet, Akane.”

“Brian, are ya goin’ back to London?”

Brian nodded in agreement n’ bowed his head. “I intended to tell you eventually. Next spring, I will graduate from university. After I graduate, I plan to return back to my home country. A friend manages a Japanese language school in London, so I want to contribute as a lecturer there.”

“Why...” The insides o’ my noggin went blank, n’ my next words didn’t come out. The Brian in front o’ me seemed like a completely different person.

“The four years I have spent with you, Akane, I truly enjoyed them. I was glad I could help with this shop, too. Seeing your smiling face every day, Akane, made me happy more than anything...”

“Why’s that all in the past tense!?”

“Akane...”

Blockin’ out his words, I spoke my mind. “I wanna stay with ya forever, Brian. You n’ me, if we manage the shop together, we can make it thrive even more than now...someday, Brian, with you...” My words couldn’t come out after that. I don’t usually hesitate to say stuff, altho’ when it came to bein’ front o’ ‘im, I stammered. Always the brilliant sun, overcomin’ anythin’ with hot-blooded power was me to a T. But in this sorta panic... Oh yeah, in this abrupt situation I ended up proposin’, but I couldn’t ‘ave imagine what came after.

Brian’s expression had a baffled look to it.

Unable to just watch me hesitate in speakin', Brian opened his mouth. "Akane, I'm happy you feel that way. Nevertheless, we can't be together forever. I have my own life. My own dreams."

"*Dreams?* Don't be selfish. Didn't ya say it yerself? Every day ya got to eat my okonomiyaki, n' it made ya the happiest man in the world."

"Yes, I did say that."

"Then *why*...!?"

"During those days in middle school, when I came to study overseas for a short-term in Japan, I came across Akane's smile. Touched by the wonders of Japan, I started to consider that I would like to know even more about the country. All of that is because I met you. And now, having spent four whole years with you, having learnt so much in Japan, I finally decided on my dream."

I didn't wanna hear any o' his words after that. N' yet, I asked anyway. "Brian...what's yer dream?"

"I want to tell all the people in England, my home country, about the wonders of Japan. Much like how me and you met, Akane, if numerous people can connect beyond the boundaries between country and country, if they can grow to smile at each other, then such a wonderful notion cannot be a terrible thing. I want to be the bridge between England and Japan – that is my dream."

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I was so stupid. Brian...I didn't know anythin' 'bout 'im. We lived for four years together, we made okonomiyaki together, we laughed together; but even then I couldn't see into his heart. Me, I'm extremely stupid – a straight-up idiot.

Even when standin' 'round the store the next day, I can't concentrate on makin' okonomiyaki at all. Brian's face flickers in my head; my drive just wasn't in it to work. Even tho' the procedure to make it is the same, the customers scoffin' 'em down say otherwise.

"Huh? Akane-chan, the taste of this okonomiyaki, isn't something about it different than usual?"

"I'd say it's kinda bland. Changed the ingredients, maybe?"

"I wanted to eat Akane-chan's usual okonomiyaki, but now..."

I frantically try to make it like I always do. But, however desperate I get, it doesn't turn out right. Yep, seems I'm in a slump.

Still in shock over my lost love, ya can more or less imagine my reaction. No, not just ordinary lost love. Big lost love. Big, BIG lost love.

Come to think o' it, when I was a middle-schooler, I fell into a slump in makin' okonomiyaki like this before. Thinkin' back, I realised what the okonomiyaki's biggest '*secret ingredient*' was. What was it? I feel like it's got a hint there to break me out o' my slump, but...

Aghh, why can't I remember!? This is all Brian's fault!

What th'heck was it, 'xactly? The okonomiyaki's biggest secret ingredient. Sauce? Bonito flakes? Green laver? Other ingredients?

I desperately search through my memories. THAT'S IT! It was definitely 'round my 2<sup>nd</sup>-year in middle school.

One day, the second my dad tried to lift a box holdin' some veggies, the second he practically threw out his back. It couldn't be helped, so he had no choice but to close up shop...was what he had in mind at first, but the neighbourhood association was gonna come by to 'ave their dinner party pretty soon, n' I knew he said that the president was totally lookin' forward to Dad's okonomiyaki. So I set out to see if I couldn't recreate his taste by any means necessary.

It took tons o' trial n' error. I threw in every single ingredient, did my research, how I could make the okonomiyaki the exact same as my dad's...I thought it through to the last detail.

On the contrary, it didn't turn out right. Even tho' I used the same ingredients n' the same griddle n' the same spatula to cook 'em like always, I just couldn't recreate the same taste at all. I'd already mastered the arm-twistin' special o' the Hino family secret technique, so why couldn't I catch up to Dad...? Frankly, I had no idea.

But one time, I figured it out – the biggest secret ingredient to okonomiyaki. Back then, I was able to figure out the answer to my problem, thanks to the help o' my friends in their 2<sup>nd</sup>-year at Nanairogaoka Middle School. We always tackled everythin' together as irreplaceable pals. The names o' those four gals were...were...

Ahh, did I just forget the rest from bein' in a rush!? At any rate, I met these four gals, n' I was able to figure out the secret ingredient. I couldn't be more grateful to those buddies o' mine.

I also love comedy. Us five together participated in a comedy contest, too. Not just any comedy contest. At the contest held at the Nanairogaoka Shoppin' District, we were gettin' SUPER BIG celeb guests. I was a huge fan o' that popular comedy duo in Kansai. At the time I snuck into their dressin' room, picked up some advice 'bout comedy, n' gettin' all totally indebted to 'em was like a dream.

The name of the comedy group us five participated under...what was it again? We were downright tense to the point that we didn't do it like we practiced at all, but thanks to that popular comedy duo I realised somethin' important. I love comedy 'cus...

Huh? Th'heck, I totally forgot again! That's so weird...

I've got other memories 'bout the five o' us.

One time, there was an art contest in school; the theme they settled on was '*My Personal Treasure*'. I pondered over all sorts o' things, 'bout what could be the most important treasure to me. It was hard rulin' out '*okonomiyaki*' n' '*comedy*', but neither of 'em felt quite right.

Back in middle school, I was part o' the Volleyball Club; I'd get the grounds all excited with my hot-blooded plays as their ace attacker. N' on the day before the tournament, I'd finally go '*I FOUND MY TREASURE!*' was what I thought.

Those were nostalgic days. The treasure I figured out back then...what was it again? Those four gals...wonder if they're doin' a'right? Wish I could see 'em again.

...Huh? That's weird. I've been talkin' 'bout my important friends way back in middle school just now...so why ain't their names poppin' up? Even tho' I've got so many memories o' 'em in 'ere, the whole thing seems completely weird, y'know. My important buds o' all things for a start, why would I up n' forget 'em? Is it 'cus I've been so busy doin' nothin' but work lately? Hey, whatcha think?

...Eh? Oh, yeah-yeah, I was tryin' to remember the secret ingredient to okonomiyaki. I totally went on a complete tangent there, huh.

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As I sigh to myself while grillin' some okonomiyaki, one customer heads home, n' then another... 'til finally, nobody's left inside the shop.

I look 'round in a hopeless mood at the empty restaurant. Dad's in the hospital for his back pain, Mom's workin' for the neighbourhood association, my lil' bro Genki's off at a trainin' camp with his Soccer Club, n' Brian's also out tonight to a casual social gatherin' with his university's circle or somethin' like that, so it's just me all alone in the shop.

I think back again on Brian's words last night. Wantin' to become the bridge 'tween England and Japan is his dream – I can perfectly sympathise with Brian on that. But, I always thought he'd be together with me forever in this shop. Thanks to all the commotion, I still 'aven't sorted out how I feel.

He's bein' too selfish, for starters. Choosin' to stay quiet over such an important thing behind my back, sayin' goodbye as he pleases without warnin'... I won't allow it. I absolutely refuse to allow it. Leavin' a nice gal like me so he can run off back to London, it's a downright sin. How am I s'posed to feel, just keep *THINKIN'* 'bout Brian?

"Um..."

A'right, when Brian comes home tonight, I'mma vent at 'im what I really think. I'll throw just 'bout everythin' at 'im. Just makin' his own dreams come true's too good n' convenient. He doesn't get it – he doesn't get what sorta pain I'm imaginin' that leavin' me behind in Japan will do. It's a low blow through n' through. Better brace yerself, Brian...

"Um...!"

...Hm? I come to my senses. Without me noticin', at the counter in the *Akane* restaurant sat a single customer. She looks to be a small woman 'bout my age, givin' me a blank stare. She's got this impressive bob with a headband, n' is wearin' a yellow cardigan.

"Ahaha...sorry 'bout that, miss. I spaced out there for a sec..." Once I've said that, I give the customer's face another look. I remember seein' this face from somewhere.

The woman with the bob hair n' headband smiles. "It's been a long time. Akane-chan."

"YAYOI...!" I ended up shoutin' by accident. No, it's that I'm surprisingly taken aback.

From the same Class 2-2 at Nanairogaoka Middle School is Kise Yayoi. Oh, right – altho' a crybaby, she's got a great interest in drawin' manga. Even after ten years, it instantly comes back to me. "Yayoi, ya ain't changed one bit! Same ol' lookin' balloon face!"

"That's uncalled for..." Yayoi's cheeks puff up even when she's laughin'.

"So what brings ya to a place like this?"

"I happened to pass in front of the shop by chance, and then I remembered you, Akane-chan. I got to missin' you, so I came in."

"Is that right? I'm awfully glad. I ain't seen ya since middle school."

"You haven't changed, either, Akane-chan."

"Yayoi, y'still drawin' manga, yeah?"

Yayoi turns her eyes away for some reason, dodgin' the question. "Yeah...I have been."

"That's incredible. Y'gotta be the most successful gal outta my class. A'right, it's almost time to close up shop, but to celebrate our reunion, I'll give a special service for Yayoi's benefit! Whatever y'like, y'can order!"

"Really!?" Yayoi unexpectedly makes peace signs with both hands to show her joy.

I eagerly start cookin' up some okonomiyaki for her. Even tho' I'm still in the middle o' a slump, right now I can't feel its weight on me. Then lemme show ya – the pride o' the okonomiyaki joint *Akane*! After all, it's for a friend I ain't seen again for the first time in a long time.

It soon comes back to me. Ten years ago, there was a time back as a schoolgirl where I'd make okonomiyaki to entertain my friends just like this, too. How didn't I realise somethin' as important as this...at the time?

"Hey, Akane-chan. Have you seen the others lately?"

"...Eh? The others...?" I involuntarily stop movin' my hands from cookin'.

—Huh? I get the feelin' I've talked to someone 'bout the same thing just recently. Who was it?

Oh, yeah! The other day, didn't I also reunite with another friend again after ten years? We bumped into each other on a street corner in the Nanairogaoka Shoppin' District...

Uhh, her name's, her name's... She loves picture books n' fairytales, she's the sorta gal who believes that if yer always smilin' then happy things'll be waitin' for ya... She'd go '*ultra-happy!*' when doin' somethin' fun, n' go '*hap-pup-puu~*' while puffin' her cheeks when somethin' bad happens...

...MIYUKI! It was Hoshizora Miyuki!

I notice the okonomiyaki on the griddle's 'bout to burn, so in a panic I move it onto a plate. "I've seen Miyuki 'round."

"Really!? Is Miyuki-chan...has she been doing okay?"

"Yeah, she said she's workin' at the bookstore in front o' the station."

"A bookstore, huh. Sounds like Miyuki-chan, all right."

Hold on a tick... Wonder how'd I, me, end up forgettin' 'bout Miyuki? Even after I just saw her, if only recently... That gal, Miyuki, she still has that book on 'er. The one she drew back in her days as a middle-schooler – *The Greatest Smile* picture book.

Oh, yeah! 'Sides us three, there's Midorikawa Nao who's the big sisterly-type with a huge family; then there's Aoki Reika, the Student Council Vice President who's really popular with the guys. Miyuki chose to model some characters after us five to create in her book, *The Greatest Smile*.

—"*Miyuki! Y'got some nerve, somehow up n' forgettin' like that.*" That's the sorta thing I told her at the time, but to tell ya the truth, I'd forgotten 'bout Miyuki 'til I saw her again by runnin' into her.

Gotta wonder why, right? Such important friends...why did I forget 'em? I wonder what this even is, this chillin' feel I'm gettin'...

As I think on it, I treat Yayoi with the finished okonomiyaki.

“It looks scrumptious. Thanks for the meal~” Yayoi gives an innocent smile like a lil’ gal, n’ then she gorges a mouthful. As soon as that happens, she absent-mindedly freezes her chopsticks in place. On a closer look, both her eyes are slightly tearin’ up.

“Ahaha, guess it’s still hot. My bad, my bad. Take yer time eatin’.” However, Yayoi didn’t catch anythin’ I said it seems, n’ she quietly moves her chopsticks to start eatin’. Guess it wasn’t that hot after all. Right after, massive teardrops are overflowin’ from her eyes, runnin’ down her cheeks. “Yayoi...what’s the matter?”

Gulpin’ down the okonomiyaki in her mouth, Yayoi cracks a smile. “It’s so good.”

In my relief, I cut loose. “C’mon, y’had me worried there. There’s nothin’ to cry ‘bout, y’know.”

Yayoi keeps quiet when she continues wolfin’ down the okonomiyaki – she must seriously like how I made the taste. I’m glad.

“...I wonder why? It’s warm, nostalgic, and it’s squeezing my heart...”

“Yer right ‘bout that. I guess it’s the first time y’all ‘ave eaten my okonomiyaki in ten years. I’ve also advanced my skills durin’ those years – I even went to London for trainin’. C’mon, hurry n’ eat up.” That moment, I suddenly come to my senses. “Yayoi...that okonomiyaki, is it really that good?”

Yayoi seems to curiously tilt her head. “Of course.”

“That right...I’m sorta glad.” When I fell into a slump, I wasn’t able to make good okonomiyaki. But even then durin’ that time, how did I break outta it? I ain’t changed my cookin’ methods, or added any secret ingredients...

Secret ingredient...?

THAT’S IT! The faint memory inside my head’s startin’ to come back – the missing memories from ten years ago’s been revived. But I gotta wonder how I’ve forgotten up ‘til now. It feels like the fog in my blurry mind’s instantly cleared up in a flash.

“Akane-chan...is something wrong?”

Hearin’ Yayoi’s words, I lift my head. “Yayoi, thanks. I...I’d forgotten somethin’ really important. You comin’ to visit me...really makes me happy.”

Yayoi has a look that says she doesn’t seem to get it, but before long, she smiles. “I’m the one who should be thanking you. A lot of tough things have been pushing me to my limits lately, but eating Akane-chan’s okonomiyaki sort of cheered me up.”

“Whatcha mean, a lotta things...? There anythin’ I can do to help with yer troubles?”

But then, Yayoi looks at the clock on the store wall, n’ raises her voice in surprise. “Oh no! It’s already that time. I...I have to get going about now.”

“Ehh? Leavin’ so soon?” There’s so many things I wanna talk ‘bout. But, Yayoi looks to be off in a hurry over somethin’.

“I’ll come again. Next time, all five of us should eat together...”

“Totally. Yayoi, good luck with yer manga!”

“You too, Akane-chan!”

After she leaves like how everyone else left, for a brief moment I stare absent-mindedly at the empty store. Reunitin’ with Yayoi snapped me outta it. The precious things I’ve forgotten...I was able to remember ‘em all.

A’right! I’ve made a breakthrough. The brilliant sun’s, hot-blooded Hino Akane’s, love life...ain’t over yet. From ‘ere on, it’s a crucial moment!

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“Brian, I wanna talk to ya ‘bout before.” That evenin’, when Brian gets home late, that’s the first thing I start sayin’.

Brian looks at my serious face n’ seems to take a guess, so he asks a question in return. “You want to talk about yesterday?”

“Yeah. No matter what, I need to tell ya ‘xactly how I feel.” Brian sits at the store counter. I face ‘im from across it, the griddle wedged ‘tween us. I remember back in the day that, in my 2<sup>nd</sup>-year of middle school, I led Brian to my restaurant n’ treated ‘im to some okonomiyaki n’ he...

No, stop. This ain’t the time to get all sentimental.

“Last night, when I heard ya talk ‘bout suddenly headin’ back to London, I...felt shaken. I thought ya were gonna stay with me forever, Brian. N’ to be honest, I got extremely depressed ‘bout how yer gonna go n’ leave me behind. So I lost my temper. I even reached the point where I couldn’t make okonomiyaki right...”

Brian looks like he wants to say somethin’, but I keep goin’ without payin’ any mind.

“But y’know, I got to see one o’ my friends again from my middle school days, n’ I realised somethin’ important. I...I’ve only been thinkin’ ‘bout myself. I ‘aven’t been thinkin’ ‘bout Brian’s feelings in the least...” Meetin’ Yayoi again revived a memory. I ain’t got a clue on why I’ve forgotten so far. But, it’s an important memory.

In my 2<sup>nd</sup>-year of middle school, while I was in my dad’s shoes cookin’ up some okonomiyaki, through trial n’ error at the time...I realised.

The okonomiyaki’s greatest secret ingredient – it’s...the feelin’ o’ wantin’ people to be full o’ spirit when they eat! If y’tightly stuff n’ cram that feelin’ into it, then the okonomiyaki’s sure to turn out delicious. The people eatin’ it will make ‘em smile.



Actually, because I put my utmost best into cookin' for the sake o' my friend, Yayoi, she was deeply moved by it. Even tho' it was an extreme slump, it was so short that it ended up lastin' in the span o' only a day, hahaha...

That ain't the only thing I remember. Back in my days at middle school when I participated in the comedy contest, at the time, it all came crashin' down, but it wasn't success or failure that really mattered. I realised what's most important was the feelin' o' wantin' to make everybody smile.

When I got an assignment called '*My Personal Treasure*', my four pals made a charm to cheer me on. It was a hand-sewn charm with me as its mascot. N' Miyuki had, thanks to her clumsiness, pricked her fingers all over workin' on it. That time made me seriously happy.

Miyuki, Yayoi, Nao, Reika...when we were all together, whether it's through even the toughest or most painful o' times, I could overcome 'em with a smile. Because o' me bein' all colourful n' my high tension, I was always told that I used to make everybody smile way back when, but that ain't really true. The one doin' all the smilin' was *me*. It's 'cus o' 'em...that I always had a smile like the brilliant sun. It's 'cus when y'care 'bout those precious to ya, then they'll start smilin'.

I look at Brian again n' say: "I...I had my way n' got all excited by myself. I only thought 'bout what's convenient for me, but when it came to yer feelings, Brian, I didn't 'ave a clue in the slightest. So if y'wanna go back to England, if y'wanna work at the Japanese language school, then I'll do my utmost best to cheer ya on!"

"Akane..."

"I'll keep on bein' here in the okonomiyaki shop. We'll end up apart, but if Brian's dream comes true, then that would be the bestest kind o' happiness for me." As I'm talkin', I start makin' some okonomiyaki for Brian's benefit. Puttin' all my passionate feelings into it, I grill up the greatest piece I could. With that sorta spirit mixed in with the ingredients, I pour the batter onto the griddle.

Brian patiently stares hard at the griddle, like he can't wait for the cookin' to be done. As I watch that face o' his, one-by-one my memories with Brian flood back in: Our very first meetin' way back as middle school students, we reunitin' when I travelled to train my skills in London, n' finally, the four straight years I spent with 'im after he came to Japan for the second time...

Brian...he chomps on the finished okonomiyaki while takin' his sweet time savourin' the flavour. A smile spreads on his face.

Brian's gonna go back to England. However, these memories ain't goin' nowhere. All the days I spent with Brian, his smile...they ain't goin' nowhere.

Raisin' his head from the plate o' okonomiyaki, Brian gives me a fulfillin' smile o' the likes I ain't never seen up 'til now n' says:

“It’s delicious. It’s incredibly delicious. Akane...thanks.”

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That night, when I go back to my room, I pull out a cardboard box jam-packed with memories o’ stuff from my middle-schooler days. Atop the box, it’s completely covered in dust. It’s been nearly ten years already since I stashed this away. Okay, time to excavate...my personal treasure.

When I open the box, it’s just like a time capsule. Out they come, out they come, out comes the nostalgic items: My graduation album, my grad anthology, a certificate n’ a trophy from the Volleyball Club, a participation award badge from the comedy contest; I didn’t quite know what to do with these clay works o’ art tho’...

N’ inside sleeps the treasure I’ve been rummagin’ for – a cute lil’ handmade mascot charm. It’s me with a volleyball makin’ a fist, with *‘fight’* written on it. It was before the volleyball tournament where Miyuki, Yayoi, Nao, n’ Reika made n’ gave it to me as a gift.

Lookin’ at this, Miyuki n’ the others’ smiles come back to me. Yeah...the days the five o’ us spent together, that friendship, is my most precious treasure. The nostalgic feeling’s squeezin’ mah heart.

Squeezin’ mah heart? Now that I mention it, Yayoi also said the same thing while she was eatin’ my okonomiyaki.

Me, I got somethin’ o’ a bizarre feelin’ goin’ on. It’s like there’s all kinds o’ funny business to think ‘bout: Like, how did I forget ‘bout Miyuki n’ the others so far? How didn’t I remember Yayoi ‘til we met again? N’ my most precious treasure...how did I ended up forgettin’ such a thing ‘til now, ‘xactly?

The time us five spent in our 2nd-year at middle school...what happened to us back then?

At that moment, I noticed somethin’. On the mascot charm Miyuki n’ the others made for me, there’s stitched marks left on it. Looks like it got fixed not too long ago. It must’ve broke for whatever reason, so I mended it.

My charm...how did it break back then? I get the feelin’ it’s some kinda hint to the mystery.

“...PreCure...” Ahn? Just now, did someone say somethin’? Am I hearin’ things?
“...PreCure...help ~kuru...”

“Uwah! I ain’t hearin’ things! Where is it!? There’s somebody ‘sides me in the room, but where’s that sound comin’ from? Don’t tell me it’s a ghost, right?”

“...Candy’s not a ghost ~kuru!...”

Uwaaaahh! The ghost spoooke! "...Hm? Did...did y'say *candy* just now? *Candy* as in sweets?"

"...*Candy's not a sweet, either ~kuru!...*"

"Uwah! Well then, who're ya?" ...Huh? The voice...I can't hear it anymore. Ooi, Sweetie-Sweet, what's the matter?

In that moment...I remember. *The Greatest Smile* picture book Miyuki drew back in middle school. The name o' the fairy that shows up in it – I'm definitely sure it's Candy. A dog or a cat or a tanuki, she'd get mistaken for all sorts o' tiny animals, n' she'd get mad every time. She's a cute lil' thing who talks with a lisp where she'd add '~*kuru!*' at the end o' all her sentences. Candy...I wonder how she's doin'...

"...AKANE~! HELP ~KURU!..."

"Dowaaaaahh!" ...Hm? Candy...? Like, THAT Candy? No-no, that's stupid! Candy's just a fancy character that shows up in *The Greatest Smile*, ain't she? So then why am I hearin' that voice? Not only that, it knows my name.

It's weird... Candy, she...even tho' she's only s'posed to be in the picture book I've read, mountains o' memories are comin' back. It's almost as if we spent time together, back when I was a middle-schooler.

That can't be right. Candy's a fairy in the picture book, n' so's the PreCure who all show up in it...

"...Akane~!..."

That's when I realised. Candy's voice...I can hear it comin' from the bookcase in my room. On it, the case is densely packed with stuff like cookin' recipes n' notebooks. However, there's just one lil' gap, n' from the other side is a light floodin' through. "What's this!? Some kinda trick?" I slide my shelf with the books over to the side, tryin' to search for the source o' the light. But, I can't see it properly.

"...Akane! Help ~kuru!..." I hear it again. There's no mistake. I can hear the voice comin' from the other end o' the bookcase. Beyond this light...is Candy herself.

I go n' quickly slide the recipes n' notebooks away one after the other. That's right! If I move the books like this, the bookcase'll suck me in. On the other side, there's this mysterious library that exists in another thrillin' dimension. It's all from *The Greatest Smile* Miyuki had drawn – I'm definitely sure that's right. If I go in there, surely just 'bout everythin'll make sense, no?

Normally in any other case, I probably wouldn't believe it. But, I'd suddenly ran into Miyuki n' Yayoi again, n' if I can remember my most precious treasure now, then I can believe in anythin'. Anything's possible.

Me, my heart's poundin'. Tho' I'm 24 years old, I've been able to stumble across a dramatic event with a fairytale that would never come true, so there ain't no reason to hesitate. From 'ere on out, maybe it's the start to Hino Akane's new life.

Ahn? What 'bout Brian? What'll happen to the shop?

I ain't got time to think 'bout that. Nothin'll get started if I just turn 'round n' look back. Y'gotta take a chance on romantic love as well as on life. N' when it comes to life, it can take some unexpected turns. "A'right! Candy! 'ERE I COME!" Just as I shout that, my body gets sucked into the bookcase together with the brightness.

Inside this space o' light, I'm fallin' down. What's this light? It's gettin' me all excited. Plus, I feel like I've already experienced this same thing before. No, it ain't my imagination. There's no doubt 'bout it. I...I've jumped into the bookcase before already; I've been to a different world just like this!

The hot-blooded power o' the brilliant sun swells up from the deepest part o' my body. It feels like I'm bein' reborn as another me. It's almost like...I'm like that Cure Sunny gal who pops up in *The Greatest Smile* picture book Miyuki drew.

Cure Sunny? Me, Cure Sunny? Hahaha...there's no way.

I fall down n' down to the ends o' the earth in this space o' light. N' whatever happens next beyond that light...is worth lookin' forward to later on. I, Hino Akane, bring this chapter to a happy end.

Welp! That's all from me, 'ave fun with the next one.

*

Chapter 3 – Kise Yayoi

In the hearts of people, they each have a hero. Because people have heroes, whenever they are in pain, whenever they are reaching their breaking point, their courage will come bursting forth. Even if they hit the rockiest bottom of life, stand up once more, and they will be able to crawl their way back up.

Who's the hero for you? It could be, say, a tokusatsu hero or the protagonist of an anime you watched when you were little? Or maybe an idol or a singer or an actress, a sports athlete, a great historical figure, a schoolteacher, a cram teacher, your parents, your club activity senior, your boss at work...

There are as many people as there are heroes, each with their own drama.

The appeal of heroes – I find it to be their flashiness when it's all said and done. When they sometimes transform and announce their names, they would shout the name of the technique for their special attack, right? It's nothing like reality when you think about it rationally, but since the audience will be expecting it they'll say, *'Yes! I've been waiting for this!'* You just can't help but get into that unique tempo.

Eh? Who's the hero for me, you ask? Weeell, it was a long time ago, so it's sort of embarrassing to remember.

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When I was little, I used to really love the hero: *Warrior of Justice, Solar Man*.

Eh? You don't know Solar Man? Oh, I guess that's natural. It's already been over ten years since the show aired.

Solar Man...he was the protagonist of a tokusatsu hero programme that used to broadcast on TV. His face had a sun-motif design, and he would always do a cool-looking pose in front of the bad guys and go, *"Justice Hero, Solar Man!"*, announcing his name. His special attack was *'Solar Flash'*. He would charge his whole body with solar energy, and use it to shoot a beam out of his forehead to defeat the enemy. Fighting with solar energy is...it might seem unique to think about, but being a huge tokusatsu hero meant it was viewed as part of the typical set-up.

I loved heroes, so I collected all sorts of merchandise. Back in my time as a middle-schooler, I used to use a hero alarm clock.

*"Good morning, boys and girls! People around the world are standing by for your awakening! Now, time to get up!"*

Every morning, it would wake me up with that brave voice. On sleepy and gloomy mornings even, it would naturally swell me up with energy.

By the way, I also liked the robot anime called *Tetsujin Senshi Robotter*. It was about the young boy Takeru who pilots a robot called Robotter and plays an active role in space.

If you want something different from purely hero things, then I would find it to be a nice refreshing change for a protagonist boarding a robot to control it. Especially in the case of *Tetsujin Senshi Robotter*, where Robotter has his own independent personality, AND he can talk in our language. He has a buddy relationship with the main character Takeru, and they talk to each other during battles.

*“Let’s go, Takeru! In order to safeguard the smiles of the people of Earth, we shall stand tall again and again!”* ...Robotter would say things like that.

His special attack was ‘*Ultra Robotter Punch*’.

On the day the Robotter toy came out, I stood in line along with the other children to buy one.

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When I was in my 2nd-year of middle school, I created my own original hero.

In Nanairogaoka Middle School, there was a poster contest for Clean School Grounds Week, and I got to draw a poster as a representative of Class 2-2. I wasn’t motivated at first, but then my classmates found me secretly drawing on the school rooftop, and because of that, they recommended me in the homeroom...

At the time, I came up with a hero named *Clean School Grounds Hero – Clean Peace Man*, and drew him up on a poster. It only resulted in a ‘*Good Effort Award*’, but the classmates who recommended me and also helped me draw the poster became my greatest friends. They helped open my heart when I didn’t have any confidence in myself.

And then, from that day forth, I...

Huh? What happened, you ask? Something amazing happened – my life had reached a seemingly dramatic turning point...

Well, now would be a good time for that story.

The first time I drew a manga...was in my 2nd-year of middle school. When I drew a one-shot manga, I chose to apply for the *Weekly Shōnen Smile*’s Manga Contest Rookie Award.

I...didn’t know – I didn’t know that drawing manga could be so overwhelmingly difficult after all. But, so long as I’ve made up my mind to carry it out to the end myself, then I figured I should give it my absolute best. I’m...a bit of a crybaby, but once I set my mind to something, my policy is to always see it through to the end.

It was around that time that I had longed to embrace the profession of being a manga artist; at first I thought about looking the part when getting into it, which is why I went and bought myself a beret. I still have it even now, the beret from that time.

The title was *Miracle Peace*. It's a story about a heroine of justice opposing evil. Miracle Peace...she was the superheroine of an aspiration I had dreamt up ever since I was a young little crybaby. My ideal self, so to speak – my alter ego. Sometimes I wonder if my heart inside only got just a little stronger...because of her. So while I was sketching my manga, Miracle Peace encouraged the artist, myself, and I was able to draw from start to finish before the deadline.

The result was an honourable mention. With it, this merit became the chance to solidify my dream. In the future, I wanted to grow up to be a manga artist. I wanted to draw a superheroine that everyone could likewise embrace with admiration, and give them all courage as well. Like how Miracle Peace rescued me, if the readers around the world who read my manga could be rescued from their despair, then I would consider it to be wonderful...

And that's the secret story of the birth of *Miracle Peace*. It's already been over ten years since then; I've grown into an adult now, and looking back on it again, it's nostalgic...and it's painful. To think there was once a time when I innocently believed in the possibilities of a hero like that...

~~~~~

I let out a sigh, as I looked out the window from my workplace.

The sun has already set, with the lights of the high-rise buildings visible in the centre of Tokyo Metropolis. It's a sight I've already gotten tired of seeing.

This here is where I work, high above on the 41<sup>st</sup> storey of a luxury tower apartment complex. When staring at the ground from up here, sometimes the people look like little specks. Busy company workers, students on their way home, happy parents with children and couples...I can see the lives of all kinds of people. And each time, I torture myself with a sense of isolation that I may no longer connect with ordinary lives like those.

Being a manga artist is a lonely career – I spend nearly all of my time of day at my desk. Rather than family and friends, I always spend the long hours socialising with fictional characters. Especially when it comes to a long-running serial spanning several years.

I couldn't have imagined it ten years ago. Having drawn *Miracle Peace* in my days at middle school, it would gain the attention of the editorial department again afterwards, who decided to turn it into a weekly serial, and it would even become beloved by readers for as long as seven years... *Miracle Peace* was the first manga I ever drew in my life. I couldn't believe that it would suddenly put me under the limelight, and that I

would be able to debut as the high-school student manga artist...what an exciting life I thought that was.

Exciting...? No, it was only exciting back when I made my debut; the rest were nothing but loneliness and the repetition of honest work.

The fate of manga serials, they hinge on a popularity poll from surveyed readers. Popularly voted manga are published with their opening pages in colour, and get picked out for the all-important front cover of magazines. On the other hand, unpopular manga are mercilessly discontinued. It's hard enough just for a serial to win, but even then, after that point a more severe world awaits.

When my *Miracle Peace* serial first started, it wasn't very popular, loitering just around the middle rankings of the readers' survey. Moreover, given that I was advertised as the '*Active High-schooling Manga Artist Girl*', I became a huge topic for discussion, and the extent of their assessment was, '*For a high-schooler's first drawn serial, it sure is a big deal, huh?*'

However, as the serial stayed on track, it steadily rose through the ranks. It often got published with its opening page in colour, and eventually came to be ranked as high as first place in the readers' survey. I couldn't believe it, either. My studies weren't very good, I'm always last in sports, but my manga serial ranking first?

In order to concentrate on the serial, I dropped out of high-school. The editor-in-chief was against the idea, but if I wanted to preserve the popularity of *Miracle Peace* as it was, I felt I had no choice but to dedicate my whole life to manga.

And so, with a workplace set up on the 41<sup>st</sup> floor of this tower apartment complex, I started my days along with my assistants chasing after weekly deadlines.

For seven years straight, the serial has continued without interruption. Two years ago it was made into a TV anime, and to this day, it airs every Sunday morning. Things like transformation items, soft vinyl dolls and other related merchandise were also put on sale one after the other. Movies, games, novels...it was spreading to other media like a ripple. Now it seems like there isn't a single person in Japan who doesn't know the title of *Miracle Peace*.

It's true. I'm not lying. Although, soon the serial will be over...

After seven long years, the battle of *Miracle Peace* is coming to an end.

No, the reason to be exact is that '*I decided to put an end to it*'. I have no regrets. Since it's what I, myself, have personally settled on as its writer...

I take a long stretch and lay down on the office sofa. With the deadline fast approaching, my assistants are busy helping me with the work until nightfall.



However, now that we're finishing up the last of the manuscripts, after all the work related to *Miracle Peace* has been finished, every one of my assistants will have to go back home. I'll be the only one left in the workplace.

The next room is the residential space. I purchased the large apartment so that I could work here, to live here. But, it's too spacious to fill by myself. I've spent nearly my entire life here as a manga artist. I drew manga here, lived here, and before I knew it, I turned 24 years old.

If someone was going to university to graduate by this time, I think they would be just the right age to become a full-fledged working adult. The starting point of life. A time to soar towards the future.

But then, what about me? Thanks to *Miracle Peace*, I've found unbelievable success and income. Not just from manuscript fees for the serial, but also royalties from tankōbon, royalties from merchandise...and even if I did nothing at all, every month, an enormous sum of money would be deposited into my account.

Feeling jealous? Yeah...you probably are.

But, no matter how much money I get, I'm just not satisfied. Because all of that isn't why I wanted to be a manga artist.

I think back upon the events of last month.

~~~~~

"You want to end *Miracle Peace*?" The editor-in-chief asked, sliding down from his chair in the conference room.

Starting off before the visit, when I had told him, '*I need to talk about an important matter regarding Miracle Peace*', I thought the chief seemed prepared for whatever it was about. However, it seemed he didn't think that I would unexpectedly jump out and say the words, '*I want to end it*'.

It was just the two of us in the conference room – me and the editor-in-chief. I quietly turned in the manuscript of the latest story for *Miracle Peace* in time, and when the chief let out a sigh of relief, it was that very moment when we began to start talking about how things should unfold from now on.

There was the sound of knocking on the conference door, and the face of a lone female editor peeped in. "Chief, pardon me for interrupting. I have Tōdō Izumi-sensei on the phone..."

"Tell him to call back." The editor-in-chief informed her sharply without even looking at her face. To that assertive tone, she put on a stiffened expression and left with a bow. "This is a surprise... Yayoi-chan, what is the meaning of this? Explain in detail."

I have been indebted to this editor for the last ten years. When I first entered on the occasion for *Weekly Shōnen Smile*'s Rookie Award, the one who gave *Miracle Peace* the most support was none other than this man. Everyone these days call me things like 'Kise-sensei' or 'Yayoi-sensei', but the chief at least calls me 'Yayoi-chan' just like when we first met ten years back. Ever since I got that honourable mention a decade ago, I came to put my trust in this editor...maybe it's because I felt a trace of Papa in him.

I was five at the time when Papa left this world. He said from the heart, '*I want you to be a kind and gentle girl like spring*', so Papa gave me the name 'Yayoi'. Even if he was awkward and wasn't very good at expressing his love, I know Papa is still watching over me from heaven even now...

The chief is also awkward and usually a blunt person, but he has a passionate personality when it comes to manga. He worries about me like I'm his real daughter, and he gave me advice on how to draw manga from scratch. In his case, I thought that I could entrust him with my life as a manga artist.

He wasn't even one of the top editors back then, but nowadays he's the editor-in-chief and is directing all the other editors.

Usually, a manga artist meeting one-to-one with the editor-in-chief personally like this is a rare thing. Each and every manga has its own editor in charge, and it's those editors that manga artists have to meet with. My *Miracle Peace* has a young editor in charge of it, too.

In spite of this, there were plenty of times I would skip over the editor in charge, and directly meet with the chief who's taken care of me since that day at the debut.

After all, the opportunity to walk out into public with my life as a manga artist was made possible thanks to him as my benefactor. "...I'm already at my limits. I do think it's a miracle that it has gone on for seven years. But I...I just can't keep drawing *Miracle Peace* anymore..."

As the editor-in-chief sighed, he stroked his stubbled chin. He has a habit of doing it on occasions to calm his mood. "You don't need to worry about the readers' popularity poll. It's true that it's been hanging somewhere around the middle rankings as of late. '*The old style was more interesting*', is about how most feel to put it bluntly. But you see, this is a long-running manga serial that was bound to travel down that road. The latest hits produced by manga artists and old-timers so far, it's been the case for everybody. There ARE times when things go well, and there are also times you'll hit a slump. If you just keep at it, I'm sure you'll—"

"It's not like that."

The chief furrowed his brow closer together. "It's lasted this long for seven years, hasn't it? Regardless if your popularity falls, whether or not criticism floods in, I won't let it end. I discovered your talent, helped with making your work grow, and whatever happens, I will protect your work to the very end. I assure you that your work on *Miracle Peace*...has found itself to be a major hit right now for *Weekly Shōnen Smile*—no, for this entire publishing company."

"We had this conversation a lot of times. Thank you so much."

"Well then, don't abandon it so easily. You should think it over again."

It was no use. The chief didn't think what I said was serious. I guess he thought I was just complaining, that I had happened to ran into writer's block.

That wasn't it. I really was at my limits...

When I tried to change the subject, I peered at the sky outside the window. The cloudy weather gave the impression that it was going to rain at any time. "Do you remember? When the *Miracle Peace* serial started, I published my comment at the end of episode one..."

"Of course I do." The editor-in-chief immediately replied. "*‘Since I was little, I pictured my own heart being saved by Miracle Peace. Now, to everyone who is feeling down, don't give up. I know there is a Miracle Peace in your hearts, too’...*"

The chief recited my comment from seven years ago, exactly word-for-word.

"It was awfully impressive. Isn't that what you told them, Yayoi-chan? Miracle Peace...she is the inspirational superheroine you pictured in your heart when you were a crybaby. And deep in your heart exists just a little strong heart – THAT is Miracle Peace after all..."

I nodded my head in agreement.

It seemed the chief had perfectly memorised how I felt at the beginning of the serial. That was at least a saving grace. *In that case, let's talk just about anything.* That's what I seemingly thought. "I said I can't draw anymore, and it isn't because of a simple slump. It isn't because my ideas have run dry, either. It's because I lost the feeling that I had in those days when the serial began."

The chief went silent with a serious look, listening attentively to what I had to say.

"In manga, no matter how much Miracle Peace overcomes adversity, no matter how much she cries words filled with hope even, the fact is that me as the author can't place any faith in her. Miracle Peace is the superheroine born from my heart. But lately, she's just been speaking uninspired dialogue, becoming nothing more than a lifeless character in battle." I heard the crack of thunder from the stormy weather.

“I see...” The chief breathed a huge sigh. “It’s true *Miracle Peace* has lost the momentum it once had as of late. The story, and the sketches, too; it has this sense of discomfort like you’ve been drawing it against your will somewhere. I’m sure that you must’ve been under a lot of distress as you were drawing, I’d imagine. ...How, though?” The editor-in-chief gently asked as if to appeal to the me of ten years ago. “How did you lose the feeling you had back then?”

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In the back of my mind, I flashed back to Mama’s face.

My mama, *Kise Chiharu*, still lives in Nanairogaoka. Ever since I lost Papa when I was five, I had been living together with Mama. But, after deciding to serialise *Miracle Peace*, ever since I dropped out of high-school, I moved to the heart of the city, and now Mama lives alone these days.

I’m busy with my manga job, and Mama works at a kid’s fashion company, so we don’t get to see each other all that often for mother-daughter time. But every once in a while, Mama gets worried about me and would travel to the heart of the city, just to come and see me at the workplace.

It was on one of those days when Mama visited the workplace. It was just before the deadline, and I was in the middle of the final stages along with my assistants. I hadn’t expected Mama to come visit me; at the end of the day, I stuck to finishing off the manuscripts, meaning I couldn’t even go eat with Mama. And yet, Mama kindly told me, ‘*don’t push yourself too hard*’, and left behind a cake for me before going back home to Nanairogaoka.

In Mama’s case, she can see me any time. She jumps on the train, then she heads back to Nanairogaoka like always. That’s what I thought.

It was late that evening. After I had finished up my work, I was absent-mindedly looking at the calendar and realised something unthinkable.

*Today...why did Mama come to visit today?* I figured out the reason too late. *I...I wonder how I could’ve forgotten.*

Papa’s death anniversary.

On Papa’s death anniversary, Mama and I would always eat together, and we made it a point to go visit his grave every year. I had never once failed to do it even after becoming a manga artist...so however busy I got, just once a year, both Mama and I would make time for at least that day – time to go and set our hearts on reporting the past year to Papa in heaven... I completely forgot about that day, and without even getting to talk to Mama enough at that, all because I was chasing after the deadline in front of me.

For a brief while, I was dazed.

Next thing I knew, I'd gotten an email from Mama on my smartphone.

*'It seems you're busy with work. Yayoi, you actually looked very tired. Take care not to ruin your health. — Mama'*

I had done something that couldn't be undone. Mama probably chose to take the day off work to come to the capital of Tokyo. But, having taken into consideration that I was busy with the deadline, because of it she went home without even mentioning it was Papa's death anniversary in the end.

Thinking of how Mama must've felt...made my heart ache. Even though Mama didn't say anything, there was no doubt that she must've been deeply hurt. I had never forgotten no matter what day it was every year before... Despite living apart, our thoughts towards Papa were supposed to have kept us tied together as mother and daughter, and yet...

It wasn't just about Papa in heaven. It's that I went as far as to hurt Mama.

That was the moment. I couldn't go on drawing any more of *Miracle Peace*. Whatever evil *Miracle Peace* fought, whatever heroic speech she shouted even, it seemed like nothing more than a pipe dream. However hard I tried to draw her courageously overcoming adversity, my chest would be in pain. You see, drawing it tore my heart to pieces – I wasn't strong like *Miracle Peace*...because I simply didn't have the mind-set to fight.

At that very moment, the story of *Miracle Peace*...was plunging into the development where the female lead fights to protect her family. The protagonist finds out her family has been taken hostage by an evil organisation. Should she fight for the world's sake even at the expense of her family, or should she cancel her transformation and surrender, to save her family...? *Miracle Peace* is forced to make a choice: To live as *Miracle Peace*, or to live as a lonely little girl. The ultimate conflict.

As I drew the manga, I thought about Papa and Mama.

Mama has always supported me with a smile. She encourages me when I'm busy – busy being a manga artist. But then—

I wonder what sort of things have I been giving Mama up to now? Have I been respecting my mama in any way, who raised me from birth so far?

I dropped out of high-school, shut myself in my large apartment in the heart of the city, kept on drawing the manga I loved with no end in sight, and before I knew it I had grown distant from Mama, and had even forgotten about Papa in heaven. I lost sight of what was most important to me, earned more money than I could ever spend, and just lost myself in drawing manga non-stop.

I look at myself like I had changed into a completely different person, so I wonder what Mama thinks of me? On the surface, she supports me with a smile, but deep down, doesn't she want me to come back to Nanairogaoka? Doesn't she want us to live together smiling like before?

When I was young, I'm certain *Miracle Peace* rescued my heart.

But then...do I have to keep drawing *Miracle Peace*, even if it means going as far as sacrificing my family? Is manga more important to me...rather than Papa and Mama?

What on earth am I supposed to live for...in the life ahead?

~~~~~

Although the editor-in-chief listened to my story while playing around with his stubbled chin, "I see...", were the only words he said when getting up, turning his back to me as he stared at the sky outside the window. It had started to rain with the clash of thunder.

"Even then, I encouraged myself to keep on drawing. I was lying to my own heart... I know it's selfish, but...I fully understand. This isn't just my problem. To suddenly end a serial that has been running for seven years, how much of a huge loss it will be...I understand where this will go. But, I'm already at my limits. In such a situation, I will apologise to all the readers who have been supporting my work... I am no longer capable of continuing to draw *Miracle Peace*. The story has reached an orderly conclusion. So, please – could you take the time to reconsider?"

The editor-in-chief turned around to look at me, his expression awfully calm. His visage...it faintly overlapped with the face of my papa in heaven.

"It has been a long time since you've talked about your feelings toward your work like this, Yayoi-chan. To tell the truth, it makes me glad."

Having braced myself for him to say even harsher things, my heart was pierced.

"You're not a girl who would lie. When was it...when we had that talk, do you think? You were a middle-schooler, when you had just lied that you were *transferring schools* on April Fools' Day, then the news spread throughout the class, and you couldn't bring yourself to tell the truth... The fact that you weren't able to tell the truth...has always been hard on you, even now."

"Chief..." I felt like I was about to sob.

"Okay, then. I understand. We will bring *Miracle Peace* to an end in a manner that best suits you. I am confident that would be the happiest thing for the work, as well as for *Miracle Peace* herself. And of course, Yayoi-chan, for yourself too."

"Thank you so much." I deeply bowed my head.

“Once you’ve finished drawing the last chapter, go visit your father’s grave. Be sure to take the time to talk with your mother. So then up to this point, *after* this point...” And then, the editor-in-chief said, “All I can say without a doubt is this: Over the past seven years of you continuing your serial in *Weekly Shōnen Smile*, you have produced a national treasure of a manga that will go down in history. I’m almost certain it has rescued the hearts of your readers. Make sure to hold onto that with pride.”

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The final chapter of *Miracle Peace* — having finished her battle, Miracle Peace brought her mission to save the world to an end, and so she returns to the neighbourhood of her hometown. Thus, reuniting with her precious family and friends.

That imagery...is also the embodiment of my own self as its author.

After I finished drawing the final part of the manuscript, I came back to Nanairogaoka.

A nostalgic hometown, the place where I was born and raised. The very thing in front of the station is a large shopping mall being built, and although it has been completely altered, the way the town is welcoming me remains unchanged.

At the forefront of the Nanairogaoka Station-Front Bookstore, there is a notice saying it is set to close down next month. As a child, I often bought manga at the bookstore, so I think it’s a little bit of a shame.

When I go to visit Papa’s grave together with Mama, I report to Papa in heaven about the end of my manga serial. And then, I apologise to him for forgetting his death anniversary.

“Papa...he must be so happy to see your face, Yayoi.” Mama happily says to me.

And so, we went back to our home as mother and daughter, and then we had a meal together. I wonder when was the last time since we’ve done that? Being with Mama around the dining table at home like this, just the two of us... Now that I’m free from deadlines, I can take my time to have a conversation with Mama... “The Nanairogaoka Station-Front...it’s been a long time since I came back that so much of it has changed. Oh, about that nice bookstore in front of the station, did you know it’s going to close down?”

Mama stops moving her hands to eat right then and there, staring at me with a puzzled expression.

Hm? Did I...say something weird?

“A long time...? Yayoi, didn’t you already come back just last week?”

“...Eh?” I couldn’t understand the significance of what Mama is saying. I mean, it really has been a long time since I came back to Nanairogaoka.

“Come on, it was just the other day. You couldn’t come up with ideas for the last chapter of your serial, so you came back home, remember? You were wandering around in front of the station and other places like the shopping district...”

Slowly, but surely, a fragment of my memory returns to me.

It’s just as Mama said – I really did come back to Nanairogaoka. I had reached my limit when it came to ideas for the last chapter of *Miracle Peace* and, being at a loss in the end, decided to go back home on a day trip. According to the editor-in-chief’s advice, he said, ‘*if you’re concerned about ideas, you should return to where it all began*’...

Because I had only stayed for a few hours, I couldn’t spare any free time to slowly eat dinner with Mama, but thanks to a great idea that came to mind, I was able to get back to my workplace to finish the manuscript for the final chapter.

It all happened just last week. “Yeah...now that you mention it, you’re right.”

Mama lets out a sarcastic laugh. “Yayoi dear, did you forget? You must’ve been really busy, weren’t you?”

“Ehehe, I guess so.” As I let out a chuckle, deep inside I tilt my head in confusion.

Is that really the case? To lose my memories from just a week ago...is such a thing even possible? It’s not just my memories. An important place to me, memories of coming back to Nanairogaoka...

I follow the string of recollection. Back then, what did I do? I was walking around the station-front and the shopping district...oh, that’s right! At night, I went to an okonomiyaki restaurant. It’s the shop and home of Hino Akane-chan who was my classmate at Nanairogaoka Middle School. Akane-chan...she was the girl always full of energy like the sun, and when we were 2<sup>nd</sup>-year students, she was the one who recommended me for the Clean School Grounds Week poster contest.

Feeling nostalgic, I entered the shop. It was already late at the time, making me the only customer. Akane-chan was delighted to see me again, and so she showed off her skills in making an okonomiyaki for me.

The okonomiyaki I had at the time, it was nostalgic and *really* delicious. But then while I was eating, naturally I started to overflow with tears, and even an inspirational idea for the final chapter of *Miracle Peace* came to me.

And then I remembered. What wonderful friends I had in middle school, I mean... Friends who stuck together handling whatever came our way. Friends who supported my dream of being a manga artist.

Noticing the time for the last train, I rushed out of the restaurant in a hurry, so I didn’t have a minute for a relaxing chat with Akane-chan.



But, it's absolutely strange. My reunion with Akane-chan, I...how did I forget about that until now? Was it because I was busy writing my manga? I mean, I saw an important friend again, didn't I? It's thanks to that moment for inspiring in me that idea for *Miracle Peace* in the first place, and yet...

"Yayoi? Are you okay?"

Mama's words bring me to my senses. "Y-Yeah, it's nothing." I smile and resume my meal.

Well, it's nothing to worry about. From now on, I'm going to have plenty of time. I can slowly pace myself remembering the old days. I fix my gaze on my mama in front of me...and say, "I'm sorry for neglecting you until now, Mama. Since my manga serial is over, I can be together with you from now on."

*I'm positive Mama will definitely be happy to hear that.* Or so I thought. Instead, Mama stares at me with a complicated expression.

"Yayoi...until now, I haven't been able to see you for very long, your own mama, and it truly made her lonely. You've been drawing manga day and night for many years, Yayoi, and I was worried so much. I'm happy we can be around the dinner table together like this again. But...is this really okay?"

"Eh...?"

"You're not going to draw manga anymore?"

I didn't think I would hear that from Mama. *Miracle Peace* is done, and the editor-in-chief gave me time to look back on myself. For now, I don't have any plans to draw manga. There's no concept for a new serial, either. More than anything, I hesitate to think about going back to those days of serialising again. I forgot about Papa and Mama; I might even lose sight of myself again.

However, when asked if I'll never draw manga again, I'm hard-pressed for an answer. What I should be doing from now on...is something I couldn't see. It's almost like a blank page...

When I'm reluctant to speak, Mama continues. "You're not blaming yourself, are you? For Papa's death anniversary the other day." I'm at a loss for words. It's like Mama can see into my mind. "Mama has always supported whatever path you've chosen, Yayoi. The manga you've drawn, the one person looking forward to it more than anyone is Mama... So please – don't blame yourself. I'm sure that's what Papa in heaven would say, I think."

To those words, I try to give as much of a cheerful answer as I can. "Mama, thank you. But, from now on, I'm going to take my time to think things over."

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On holidays, the park is flooded with families and couples.

Alone, I lie down on the park's green lawn to take a deep breath. The seemingly clear blue skies, the perfectly fresh air, the gentle breeze... I've only ever drawn these dramatic events in fantasy worlds in manga, but to think there is such a commonly strong impression in reality's ordinary life.

As I doze off, I recheck my memories to sort them out. About my time in middle school, the time since I became a manga artist... I've been busy for so long, so long that I haven't even had time to see my classmates who were my closest friends back in middle school.

But...it's strange. I know I should have a lot more friends besides Akane-chan who I met again the other day, and yet I can't remember their faces or names. Even though we did everything together, too...

Why...? Why is so much of my important memories missing, anyway? Like when I forgot Papa's death anniversary, is everything important to me going to disappear one-by-one?

Come to think of it, in *Miracle Peace*, I had drawn an episode just like this. The main character, Miracle Peace, has her memories erased by the enemy's power. She loses any recollection of being a heroine of justice who saves the world, and goes back to being a normal girl. But, through reuniting with friends she once met, she regains her own memories and goal. And once again transforms into Miracle Peace, standing up against evil.

What if...it's possible that someone had erased my precious memories, too...? What if my life now is an illusion, and that this isn't the real me...

Uh-oh, that's no good. *Miracle Peace* is already over. What's more, those kind of things in manga can't happen in the real world. I should've already...

That moment – a voice from somewhere can be heard. "Twisted evil will not escape my clutches! Warrior of Justice, Miracle Peace, IS HERE!"

At first, I think I'm hearing things. Even though *Miracle Peace* has already ended, hearing that self-intro of hers...I wonder if I still haven't broken free from the world of manga yet...?

However, that's not the case.

I get up off the lawn, look around the park, and see some children cheering loudly out of joy. A show of *Miracle Peace* is being held on the park's outdoor stage. The cartoon-based costumes of Miracle Peace and an evil monster, they are showing off their fights on top of the stage.

Miracle Peace shows are held all over the whole country. I even received an invite one time, where I went to see a performance in Tokyo. Although, I had no idea that the show is being performed even in my hometown of Nanairogaoka.

The children in the audience seem to be...swinging between joy and worry over *Miracle Peace*'s actions. I look fondly at the sight as my whole face smiles. I used to be one of those children, too, when I was young. I admired heroes, went to see their shows, and I got to shake their hands. Maybe from among those children even, a new hero brought to life by a child will one day appear.

Thinking that while staring at the audience, in the corner of the very back row, I see a kid sitting by herself. She's a girl about ten years old, who appears to be quietly drawing something in her open sketchbook.

She catches my eye, so I walk up to the child for a closer look. Secretly peeking into the sketchbook from behind, my eyes widen.

What the girl is drawing is...a sketch of *Miracle Peace*. Watching the show, she's copying down what she sees with pinpoint accuracy. It has a professional touch you wouldn't expect from a child, and without thinking, I gasp.

The girl realises me looking, and she spins around. "UWAAH, DON'T LOOOK!" The girl reflexively hugs the sketchbook to her chest tightly to hide it.

I couldn't help bursting out into a fit of laughter at her reaction. I mean, the way she behaves is just like me when I was little. I didn't have any confidence in my own drawings, either, and it was embarrassing to show to others. This kid must be the same, too. "Sorry for looking without me asking. You're very good. It surprised me."

The girl then gives a bashful smile, and says in a tiny voice, "Th-Thank you." Not knowing that I'm the author of *Miracle Peace* at all, the girl once again starts quietly drawing. I run with my interest in this girl, sitting next to her.

When I look at her earnest expression to draw, more and more I remember my past self. "If you don't mind, can you show me your other drawings, too?" She turns the pages of the sketchbook, letting me see. In there are sketches of heroes and heroines whom she has drawn so far. The more it amazes a manga artist like me, the more vivid and dynamic each sketch are, too. Liking heroes and heroines very much...there's no mistaking that she often comes to these shows to keep drawing.

At the moment of giving back the sketchbook that was shown to me, I notice a name written on the back cover.

—*Midorikawa Yui*.

My heart pounds with a heavy pulse. This name...where have I...

"Yui! Sorry to keep ya waiting!"

I hear an energetic woman's voice, causing me to lift my head. She is a tall woman with shopping bags looking down at the girl. In contrast to her dignified expression, the yellow bunny-eared ribbon on her head is quite cute.

The girl named Yui also looks at her, and smiles. "Nao-ane, you're late!"

I stare at the woman, and I cry out in surprise. "Nao-chan!"

"No way... Yayoi-chan!?"

~~~~~

I sit on the park bench, and with Nao-chan, the two of us chat.

Midorikawa Nao-chan used to be in the same class at Nanairogaoka Middle School. She was the ace of the Girls' Soccer Club, fast on her feet, and always playing it straight was her motto. She was the oldest daughter of a large family, so she had to look after her little brothers and sisters. Around the time in her 2<sup>nd</sup>-year, a new little sister was born, making for seven siblings. That baby's name...was Yui-chan.

The *Miracle Peace* show ends, with Yui-chan lining up in a queue for the handshake session.

"Oh, yeah. Your manga of *Miracle Peace* that won an honourable mention, the one ten years ago back in our 2<sup>nd</sup>-year of middle school... With a series like this, it sure is amazing that it's run for this long."

"Nao-chan, you've read it!?"

"Course I have! Yui's a fan of *Miracle Peace*. That girl...she's been crazy about it ever since she could make her own decisions. Even now that she's ten, she still goes to these shows. Having me tag along is also really hard."

Although she says it's hard, Nao-chan gives a fun-looking smile.

Standing in line for the handshake session, Yui-chan turns toward Nao-chan and waves her hand. Nao-chan waves back. "Yayoi-chan...I want to thank you."

"...Eh?" Seeing Nao-chan's face suddenly turn serious, I'm bewildered.

"Yui's been timid ever since she was little. She wasn't used to talking with people, and she didn't even have any friends. She wasn't very good at studying and doing exercises, and she didn't have any confidence in herself. But, that all changed after she started to draw. I'd find her get absorbed in her work and lose track of time. Little-by-little, however, it's looking like she's coming around to being confident in other stuff, too."

"Just like me when I was a kid..." Thinking back, I remember back in my childhood how I changed when I started to draw.

“She’s found something she really likes, and recently she’s been full of energy every day. I think it’s all thanks to her finding *Miracle Peace*. Yui was saved by *Miracle Peace*. And it’s thanks to you, Yayoi-chan.”

“I don’t know about that...” I turn red as I wiggle in my seat.

“Well, except her sketches aren’t as good as yours, Yayoi-chan.”

“No. Even though she’s only ten, to draw like that means she has talent. I wonder if she’ll also become a manga artist in the future?” My heart is enveloped with joy.

*I feel so happy* – I think that from the bottom of my heart. I know that *Miracle Peace* has lots of fans, of course. I had done plenty of autographing sessions at bookstores. Even when I went to see the show in Tōkyō that one time, hearing the children’s cheers warmed my heart. However, in my hometown of Nanairogaoka, in such a place as familiar as this, there was someone in pain who had been rescued by my manga.

I remember the editor-in-chief’s remark.

*—Over the past seven years of you continuing your serial in Weekly Shōnen Smile, you have produced a national treasure of a manga that will go down in history. I’m almost certain it has rescued the hearts of your readers. Make sure to hold onto that with pride.*

It’s just like the chief said. And yet, I still... “I’m sorry. The *Miracle Peace* serial...has ended.”

As I mutter, Nao-chan nods. “I know.”

Today’s the release date for the latest issue of *Weekly Shōnen Smile*. It’s supposed to be published with the last chapter I had finished drawing the other day. But, to end the manga after spanning seven years...I wonder how the readers will react to that?

“You’re not going to draw anymore?”

I silently think it over. Usually I have trouble putting my own thoughts into words, but in front of Nao-chan, I can speak out honestly. “To tell you the truth, I lost sight of what was important to me when I was drawing manga, and gradually my heart got worse and worse. So then, I thought I should get away from the manga world for a while. To look back and give myself time to recover... But, when I ran into you and Yui-chan, I think I found the real meaning behind the manga I drew. For me to have kept drawing *Miracle Peace* all the way up until now, it was really great. The one whose heart that needed saving...was none other than my own. Nao-chan...I’m so glad to have met you.”

“Same here...” Nao-chan seems to have remembered something as she looks over to me. “The meaning behind the name ‘Yui’ – *‘it’s a binding tie that’ll bring the people around her closer together, and we hope she’ll turn into that sort of girl’*, that’s the kind of feeling we put into it. Me and you being able to meet again like this, Yayoi-chan, it might be the miracle Yui brought us.”

“You’re right. I think so, too.” Before I know it, my cheeks are warmed by the trails of my tears. “I want...to draw manga again.”

I spontaneously mutter. Nao-chan seems to abruptly burst into a smile when she looks at me. “Really?”

“I don’t have any ideas yet, though.”

“If it’s you, Yayoi-chan, I’m sure you’ll draw again. You’ll take the whole world by surprise with a new series.”

With the handshaking wrapped up, Yui-chan waves to the departing Miracle Peace.

Me and Nao-chan both get up from the bench. I gaze at Miracle Peace from her back. “I...love manga, despite it all. Even though *Miracle Peace* might already be over...and I think about how there may even be times where I may lose heart after this... But, for the sake of all the people who are looking forward to reading my manga, I want to keep on drawing from now on.”

“That’s the Yayoi-chan I know!”

I have just one last request to ask from Nao-chan. “Hey, Nao-chan. About me being the author of *Miracle Peace*, could you keep it quiet from Yui-chan?”

“Sure, but why?”

I say with a mischievous smile, “Because a hero has to hide their secret identity, right? Oh, or in my case, not a *hero*, but a *heroine*.”

~~~~~

I wave my hand at Nao-chan and Yui-chan.

Nao-chan appears to have preparations for her siblings’ dinner, so she carries the shopping bags in her arms and leaves. Guess she’s still managing her huge family as the oldest sister as usual.

Yui-chan, not suspecting for a minute in any way that the author of *Miracle Peace* might be me, sends me off with a “*Onē-chan, see you later!*” before going home.

I want Yui-chan to keep drawing from now on, too. Even if she may have to face a lot of hardship, I want her to at least remember the times like these. So there can be a Miracle Peace in her heart...

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I head back home.

At that time, my heart pounds again with a heavy pulse. I remember now. Miyuki-chan, Akane-chan, Nao-chan, Reika-chan— The five of us were always together. The existence of my precious friends who had all but vanished from my memories, they were brought back thanks to my reunion with Nao-chan. The ones who supported me so much in being a manga artist...were none other...than those four girls. Such important friends, how could I...

I...I feel like I'm still forgetting something important.

Just then, my smartphone rings. It's from the editor-in-chief. "Do you have a minute?" The chief's voice I had often heard just the other day, it feels very nostalgic somehow.

"Sure. What is it?"

"The last chapter of *Miracle Peace*, it's received great reception. The guys in the company even say they were all deeply moved. As you know, for long-running serials, many often end in anti-climactic and disappointing finales. But, consider the ending we have that even long-time fans of *Miracle Peace* can agree on. You have made a spectacular conclusion to a seven long year story."

"Thank you so much." I feel relieved.

"So, there's this one thing I wanted to call you about that's been bothering me, but... On the last page, you drew a little certain something, didn't you? Fella looks like a tiny animal."

"...Eh?"

"I didn't notice it the first time I checked, but...*what*...is this?"

"...What is what?"

"You don't have to play dumb. Anyhow, it's something you secretly drew in as a prank, right? Well, we can't fix it since it's already been published, but to be playfully adding a thing like this to the very end, Yayoi-chan, you sure are a jokester."

I immediately go into a nearby convenience store, and bought *Weekly Shōnen Smile*. Normally I don't buy my own manga to read it, so it feels a bit strange.

I open to see the last page of *Miracle Peace*. It's the scene where the family and friends of her hometown are welcoming the main character's return. At the family and friends' feet, there is a small unfamiliar animal-like character that's been drawn in a very teeny manner. It has two pretty pink ribbons fixed on its head.

A dog? A cat? A tanuki? A piglet? ...What is it? I don't remember a character like this, and I don't remember drawing it, either. Weird... I wonder when it was drawn? Did one of my assistants add this in? No, I must've checked the manuscript over a dozen times. If anyone could've drawn it, it would've been only me.

Just then, a memory that has been asleep resurfaces.

Candy...! This is the fairy that appears in *The Greatest Smile*.

*The Greatest Smile* – it's a picture book drawn by my classmate Hoshizora Miyuki in middle school. In order to save this world and Märchenland from bad guys who want to bring the worlds to a Bad End, Cure Happy, Cure Sunny, Cure Peace, Cure March, and Cure Beauty— It's a story where five warriors join to fight together.

PreCure...it was something I aspired towards. The author, Miyuki-chan, loves picture books and fairytales, she is the kind of girl who believes that happy things will be waiting if you always smile. I had been a crybaby since I was little with no confidence in myself, so when I met that girl, when I read that picture book, a courage swelled up from the bottom of my heart.

Moreover, no matter how you look at it, the Cure Peace who appears in the book is actually modelled after me. Using my name and my personality, Kise Yayoi makes her appearance inside the picture book.

In those days, there was an oh-so-innocent thought, '*I want to transform into a PreCure, too!*'

Cure Peace was a warrior with an attribute over lightning, and her special attack was '*Peace Thunder*'. She would put up peace signs above her head, and from them she'd charge her electrical powers and release it at the enemy. But she was a crybaby, so she would normally get startled and teary-eyed every time she'd charge her lightning attack.

Cure Peace's self-intro was, '*A sparkling and glittering, Rock-Paper-Scissors♪ Cure Peace!*' And when she says, '*Rock-Paper-Scissors♪*' at that moment she would really play the game. '*Rock*', '*Paper*', '*Scissors*' —it was different each time in every transformation, and that day would have been a super lucky day for me if I win.

Oh...I'm making up my own things for myself now. *The Greatest Smile* wasn't written with that much sort of detail.

But, I wonder why... When I search my memories of *The Greatest Smile*, I can remember it in great detail like I really experienced it. I just can't think of it as anything more than a fantasy story I read in a picture book, though...

Even so, why did I...why is it that I drew Candy in the final chapter of *Miracle Peace*? The memory of *The Greatest Smile* sleeping deep inside my heart, did it come out while I was drawing my manga?



But, for the last ten years I have forgotten about the picture book, why now? Did...did I have that much of a strong attachment to Candy?

I stare at Candy inside *Miracle Peace* once more. Having returned to being human and is heading back to her hometown, the protagonist faces Candy who is jumping up and down in order to get her attention about something. As if to warn her of a crisis...

I do a double-take to my surprise. In the manga, for a brief moment, it looked like Candy actually moved.

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That night, when I got back home, what happened during the day has made me so uneasy that I couldn't sleep at all. Mama has already gone to bed in her own room, with my surroundings falling into complete silence. In the bed of my room, I just stare at the ceiling. "...PreCure..."

I catch a voice from somewhere, making me get up from my bed.

Am I hearing things...? I listen closely.

"...PreCure, help ~kuru..."

Without a doubt, I can hear a voice.

Weekly Shōnen Smile has been left open on top of the table. I stand up, to get a good look at its pages. Drawn on the last page of *Miracle Peace* is Candy, but...her figure, it seems like she moved again.

It's Candy. Candy is asking for help!

I thought so intuitively. I'm pretty sure it would be unbelievable for normal people. However, I was convinced. If you want to know why, it's because this is how the principle to a parallel fantasy world unfolds. The main character, who is in the real world, is being sought out for help by a character travelling from another world. And right now, this makes me the main character of that story.

The Greatest Smile drawn by Miyuki-chan, it also begins with the fairy Candy coming from Märchenland to search for help from someplace in the real world. "...Yayoi~!..." Candy calls out my name. There's no mistaking it. Candy is looking for help. The world of *The Greatest Smile* is calling to me.

I can't help but go. I can't help but embark into the world of picture books, to save its world from a crisis together with everyone. It's because I'm Cure Peace. And given the consistency of how the story goes, it really wouldn't make sense for me to not be, otherwise. Or rather, if I think that I'm Cure Peace, then it would explain this mysterious phenomenon.

Yes, I am Cure Peace. But, my memories of even being called Cure Peace, and even the memories of my friends have been lost, and I had been living as a manga artist up until this time.

And now, Candy is sending me an SOS. Although I don't know why, Candy can't come directly to this world. So instead, she could only send her voice and intentions to me. I'm sure the Candy drawn on the last panel of *Miracle Peace*...is that SOS.

I had always fantasised where one day a moment like this might come ever since I was little. But, I never thought such a thing would come after I've grown up...

“...Yayoi! Help ~kuru!...”

“Candy! Where!? Where are you!?” I rely on her voice to look around the room.

Candy...she's a character in *The Greatest Smile* that Miyuki-chan drew. However, right now, that picture book isn't here.

How can I get from this world to the world Candy is in, anyway? There must be a door somewhere. Through the medium of some kind of door or gate, I can travel to a parallel world. That is the principle of fantasy. The door could be something like the wall of an unassuming building, a mirror, or a wardrobe...the patterns are all diverse.

I desperately trace back my memories, to try to remember the contents of *The Greatest Smile*. Inside that story, where is the door set up? How can I be able to open the door...in order to reach the other world?

Miyuki-chan loves books... Of course, it's the bookshelf!

I face the bookshelf in my room. On there, over these past seven years, Mama had diligently bought tankōbons of *Miracle Peace* to the point that it's tightly packed.

A mystical light overflows from a gap between the books. It's as I thought – this bookshelf really is the door to the other world! “Wait for me, Candy...”

Facing the bookshelf, I suddenly remembered something and left my room. Holding my breath, I quietly open the door to Mama's room. Mama currently hasn't even noticed any signs that something happened to me; she's sleeping soundly in bed. “Mama, I'm always making you worry so much...I'm sorry. I have to go now.” I softly whisper, and when I close the door, I return to my room.

The Solar Man alarm clock by my bedside, it seems like he's encouraging me again.

Right! Once I've motivated myself, I face the bookshelf for the second time. I slide the *Miracle Peace* tankōbons around like a puzzle. Even though nobody told me how, for some reason I knew what to do.

With the bookshelf lined with the manga I had drawn and the gateway to another world that I'm about to journey into, I guess I could say I must seem like quite the dramatic heroine.

My body is engulfed in light, and I'm sucked into the bookshelf. I'm falling through a realm of mystical light.

That's right! I remember! At the end of this light is another dimension. It's a Mysterious Library where fairytales from around the world are gathered, and we used it as our secret base when we were middle-schoolers...

I want to get there, fast. I want to see Miyuki-chan and the others.

Miracle Peace has reached its end at the final chapter. However, my life isn't over yet. From now on, I'm going to write an uncharted story.

*

Chapter 4 – Midorikawa Nao

I love my family. I've seen all kinds of news that family bonds have been weakening and the nuclear family's becoming more common with the influence of declining birth rates, but I'm not so sure about all that. 'Cause my family's a good old-fashioned Shōwa-style household.

I think I oughta introduce the members of my proud family, the Midorikawa family – wanna give it a listen? This is gonna go on for a while, so brace yourself. Anyhow, nowadays I'm part of an unusually big family of seven kids.

First is my dad, Genji.

He's the backbone of the household, and he works as a master carpenter. Normally he's quiet and doesn't talk much, but he speaks crudely just like any sophisticated craftsman. He's tall and well-built; a real man's man. When I get married, it'd be great if it were to a guy like Dad...but when I told him that, Dad said, "When you bring your fiancé here, I'm gonna beat 'im up, so brace yourself!" So much for that.

Huh? My fiancé Nah, I don't have one. I'm not looking, either. No, I'm not lying. I think whoever I married would have a hard time. 'Cause I hate people being crooked. I just flatly say that I don't tolerate when something doesn't make sense.

When I was in middle school, I was eating lunch in the courtyard with my classmates when an older student came along and said, "This is the spot we always use, so move it!" Without thinking, I said sternly. "I don't think that makes sense!"

Dad really hates crooked stuff, too. I wonder if I inherited Dad's personality?

Dad says that a carpenter's most important skill is planing. He's had me help out with it before, but planing in a neat, straight line is really hard. I hesitate and can't keep the plane straight. But it feels good when I can plane well; the craved wood is thin like bonito flakes.

Dad also gave me my name, 'Nao'. When I was a middle school student, our homework assignment was to research the source of our names, and he explained "I had just one wish: to raise you to be a straightforward kid. So I picked Nao, like a straight line." Don't you think that's kinda simple? Well, I thought it sounded like something Dad would come up with.

Next is my mom, Tomoko.

She's a plucky mom who was blessed with seven kids to raise. No one can beat her when it comes to child rearing; you could say she's a veteran mom.

I'm the oldest kid, so naturally I helped Mom out, and she taught me how to cook and sew. She's best at cooking her Mom Curry. Mom's speciality for our family curry is using grated apple as a secret ingredient. The family she was born and raised in Nagano has used apples as the secret ingredient for generations.

Now that I'm 24, I experience Mon's greatness on a personal level. 'Cause when she was my age, she had already married Dad and given birth to me.

Next I'll introduce my little brothers and sisters.

First, there's the oldest boy, Keita. He's 21 and a college student. Just like his big sister, he's real handsome, and he's been influenced by Dad all the way to studying architecture at university. Dad shouts at him, "If you wanna be a carpenter, hurry up and do some hands-on work. Don't get too big-headed." But Keita says he wants to be an architect. He told me that in secret the other day, but the house he blueprinted out himself looks like something Dad would've dreamt up. Seems like he's still too embarrassed to tell Dad himself.

Haru is 19. She loves plants, and after she graduated high school, she started working at the flower shop in front of Nanairogaoka Station. She's so cute that she's super popular; people say she's something of an idol at the shopping district and make a fuss over her.

Hina is 16. She's a high school student. She loves animals; a real pain who keeps bringing in stray dogs and stray cats. I wonder if she gets attached because she got lost so often when she was little. Lately she's been saying she wants to be a vet.

Yūta is 14. He's in the Tennis Club at his middle school, and he's pretty good. He goes to Nanairogaoka Middle School, the same as me. It seems like he has a really passionate rivalry with the Soccer Club, and he's always going on about "From now on, the age of soccer is over; it's the age of tennis!" In any case, I want him to work hard to get into the nationals.

Kōta is 12. He's in sixth grade. He loves comedy, and he's a positive type who always makes people at school and in the Midorikawa family laugh. 'Cause he wants to be famous like his favourite popular comedy duo. Speaking of which, back when I was a middle-schooler, there was a comedy contest in Nanairogaoka, and me and my classmates participated. The guests back then were the same duo Kōta likes.

Yui is ten. She's in fourth grade. She's shy and timid, but she loves heroes, and when it comes to drawing she's better than anybody. She loves the manga called *Miracle Peace* and seems to draw it every day.

Oh, yeah! The writer of *Miracle Peace* is my classmate from middle school. Isn't that amazing? The other day, me and Yui went to see a *Miracle Peace* show in the park, and I just happened to run into her. She's loved heroes ever since she was little, too, and her name is...huh? I can't remember. But why not...?

Well, anyway, that was my family. Dad, Mom, and us seven kids make a family of nine. Add two more and we could be a soccer team.

Me? I don't need to talk about me. 'Cause there's not really anything to talk about.

Huh? It doesn't make sense to keep quiet about just me?

Ooh, right where it hurts. To be honest, I don't wanna talk. 'Cause I don't really wanna look back on the past.

That doesn't sound like me? All right, I get it. I'll tell you.

I Nao, am 24. I'm living with my whole Midorikawa family in Nanairogaoka. ...Yeah, saying so little doesn't explain anything. I know, I know...

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"Nao-senpai! Good morning!"

The voices of my juniors running across the lawn bring me back to reality. It's Arisa, the team captain and its driving force. "Morning, Arisa! Let's try to keep in time today!"

"Yes, ma'am! We still have a long ways to go for a fair game!"

"That's the spirit, that's the spirit! Fight!"

As Arisa kicks the ball, she joins her teammates, already starting practice.

It's a soccer field on the outskirts of Nanairogaoka. Clear skies and green grass sprouting. Wearing a jersey, I appeal to the junior girls, encouraging them.

"Arisa, play fair with the front penetration today! Sakura, get closer to your teammates! Rui, you gotta rotate your defences!"

The players respond with an energetic, "Yes!" One player gives a sarcastic laugh and says, "Nao-senpai sure is scary."

"Hey! Don't waste time talking! Focus, focus! That's not good enough for the next practice game!" I look at the young juniors drenched in sweat, and I'm immersed in a strong feeling.

Up until two years ago, I was a member of this university's Soccer Club, too.

In high school, I made it as far as the girls' soccer national tournament; to my chagrin, we lost the championship title, but finishing second was still a good result. Both the middle schools and high schools in Nanairogaoka have had thriving soccer teams from the start, and championships to show for it. But for Nanairogaoka High, the school I went to, getting the runner-up position was the best they'd ever done.

Since I shone making the most points, I got recruited for all kinds of Nadeshiko Leagues and university Soccer Clubs. My teammates got excited saying how amazing that was, but I turned down all the recruiters and went on here to Nanairogaoka International University.

My teammates all said how it was a waste and how I could play for much better teams, but they couldn't change my intent.

Why did I turn them down? I was settled on the reasons. 'Cause I like the town of Nanairogaoka. I was born in this town, I went to school in this town, I went shopping in this town's shopping district, and I made lots of friends in this town.

But more than anything else, I couldn't bear to live away from my family. At Nanairogaoka International University, I could commute to school from home, and it was close to the soccer field we practiced on, too. There are a number of players I've known since middle school, too. 'Cause if I had chosen another club team or university, I would've had to live by myself, away from my family. And living by yourself takes money; a house is a big financial responsibility. So I thought it'd be nice to go to university in this town and keep on playing soccer like I love.

Besides, my goal isn't to join a championship team or school. I just love soccer, simple as that. I'd rather have fun playing with teammates I can believe in than win anything.

You might say I'm crazy to say something like that, but it's the way of life that makes sense to me.

I haven't had very impressive results in university. But I love this university's team. So now that I've graduated, since I was qualified to, I've been successful leading my juniors as its coach.

Even now that I've graduated university, Nadeshiko League teams invite me to work as their assistant coaches all the time. But I'm not interested. 'Cause this is where I belong.

After we won the World Cup, girls' soccer has spiked in popularity, and the number of young players wanting to get into Nadeshiko Japan has kept on growing. Maybe some new talent will be born here in Nanairogaoka and eventually be active on the world stage. I strive to train my juniors with that in mind – sometimes playfully, sometimes harshly.

Huh? Do I not play anymore? Well...let's drop the subject.

Why? Does it really matter? I don't talk about my past to anybody.

~~~~~

The sun sets, and once they've finished practice, the juniors wipe off their sweat and leave the field. "Nao-senpai, thank you again for today!"

“Your coaching was very helpful. I look forward to working with you again!”

I wave to the juniors bowing their heads and answer, “Good work today, everybody! The practice game is fast approaching, so get plenty of rest tonight!”

“Yes, ma’am!” I watch my juniors leave and think to myself.

What a fantastic team. Those girls are definitely reaching a whole new level from when I played, and the unity of the team is growing, too. At this rate, winning the national tournament isn’t such a crazy dream.

No, winning or losing’s not what’s important. We can’t obsess over winning. With those girls’ teamwork, as long as they face it with all their effort...

Speaking of which, in my second year of middle school, I remember me and my four friends took part in a class-vs-class relay race. It’s one middle school memory that left a big impression. There were kids who weren’t very good runners competing, and some people were like, “With members like these, we’re never gonna win,” but I felt like I just wanted everybody to run together. Winning isn’t everything. You’ve gotta think about what’s more important.

Eventually, I, acting as the anchor, tripped and fell right in front of the goal, but my friends who were running together gave me a warm welcome at the goalpost. I really cried. Of all of my life that I can remember, my friends from back then are my eternal treasure.

My friends who ran with me, I wonder if they’re still doing okay...

But I wonder why...I can’t remember the four people I ran with. Weird...

Hm...?

Just then, I notice. A single towel’s been dropped on the sunset-covered lawn. Someone must’ve used it for practice and then forgotten it.

For Pete’s sake...

I grab the towel and go to the locker room, where the juniors are changing clothes.

Light floods from inside the locker room through the door’s window. I can hear the juniors talking, too.

Thank goodness they haven’t left yet.

I stop in front of the door to the locker room and get ready to knock. But then, I hear the conversation going on inside.

“What do you think of Nao-senpai, really?” It’s Arisa, the captain. The other juniors give their answers.

“She’s kinda annoying. She’s enthusiastic and listens to what we have to say, but...”

“What’s the use in saying something like that? She goes through so much trouble to coach us with kindness.”

“Yeah. Even though she’s been invited to help coach the Nadeshiko Leagues, she turned them down and specially volunteered for her alma mater, right? We should be thankful...”

I shouldn’t listen. But I hold my breath and listen closely.

“But Nao-senpai’s already graduated, right? Isn’t it irresponsible for her to just want to practice with us?”

“That’s what I’m saying. Grads are always butting in.”

“Nao-senpai was the highest scorer in the high school nationals, wasn’t she? So why did she go to this college?”

“She never says. Just says, ‘No need to make a fuss over winning. I just wanna play with everybody.’”

“What a waste. Wouldn’t she have done more by now if she had joined some club team?”

“No doubt. Maybe she would’ve joined Nadeshiko Japan and made the world finals.”

“Besides, I’ve never looked at eyes like that, either...”

“Eyes like that...?”

“It’s settled, right? ‘Cause of her right leg...”

My right leg throbs slightly.

“So really, she’s trying to project her unfulfilled dreams onto us now?”

“You think? But that’s none of our business...”

I’ve been frozen listening in front of the door. But I’m not brave enough to listen to any more talk; I quietly turn back and leave, dragging my aching leg along.

~~~~~

There’s one thing I’ve noticed as I’ve grown up.

The creatures called grown-ups aren’t really strong at all. They just fake it so kids and young people won’t see their weakness. Parents, teachers, seniors you look up to...even those people, every single human being, worries and suffers. Feels sad and cries.

When I was a kid, I tried to be the big sister who my little siblings could rely on. And on my soccer teams in high school and college, I became the leading captain and tried to control the team. Now I'm a coach, and I try to guide my college juniors.

But I know now that I'm an adult: there's no such thing as a perfect person. If anything, once you're grown up, you've got even more worries. More failures. The stuff that makes you wanna cry piles up like a mountain. But you can't show your weakness to the people you stand over.

As I walk along the streets at night, I remember what I overheard my juniors saying before.

Up until now, I thought I was thinking for the team and doing a good job coaching them. I thought I was serving as a senior that the juniors could rely on.

But today, I realised the reality. The juniors don't want my coaching at all. That's what they were thinking behind their brisk smiles.

What sort of face should I go to the field with tomorrow? Should I act like a reliable coach? Pretend I didn't hear anything and talk to the juniors like I always do? Or...

Lately there's been a lot of development around the front of Nanairogaoka Station; a big shopping mall was just finished. Even now, they're saying they're gonna tear everything down for land development; it really makes you miss the old days...

Suddenly, I freeze.

A glaring light shines on me, cutting through the darkness. I've been walking so absent-mindedly that I cross the signal-less crosswalk without noticing a semi-truck approaching.

My body stiffens in terror; I can't move. The truck coming closer before my eyes let out a piercing roar just like a monster.

No, it's not a roar. It's the horn. The sound makes me shudder. This light, this noise...it's just like that moment two years ago.

A semi-truck before my very eyes, lights illuminating my surroundings, the horn sounding.

But whatever I tell my legs to do, they won't listen. I always kept calm around trucks like these up until two years ago. It's mortifying. It hurts. It's no use...

Just then, I hear a screeching voice. "Nao!" Someone pulls my arm with all their strength, and I collapse onto the asphalt.

In a hair's breadth, the semi-truck rushes off under my nose at a ferocious speed.

I stare dazedly at the truck through the whirling dust cloud. But then I turn around to see the person who saved me from the brink of death.

A tidy woman looks at me as she catches her breath. She must've put all her effort into running to save me. Her serene eyes are beautiful. I recognize her face.

I know her very well from long ago.

I remember her name and shout with a smile, "Reika?!"

~~~~~

I don't know why, but until this moment, I had completely forgot my childhood friend Reika existed. I was best friends with Reika when we were young, and we were in the same class at Nanairogaoka Middle School. She was one of the friends who ran with me in the sports festival relay race.

Reika is the daughter of Nanairogaoka's respected Aoki family. She's a beauty who's great at archery and calligraphy, graceful, and has a way with words. When we were in middle school, she used "-san" with everybody properly, but since we've known each other for so long she's always just called me "Nao." That really makes me happy.

"It's been a long time, Nao." That smile hasn't changed at all since we were kids. She was super popular with the boys.

"Reika, you saved me. Thank you." Reika says that she's working as a teacher at Nanairogaoka Middle School now. When we were in middle school, she was the Class Representative *and* President of the Student Council. It's a job that suits her. She must be really popular with her students.

I bring Reika home with me. "I'm home, everybody!" At the signal of my voice, my siblings make a commotion running from all around the house.

"Welcome home, Nao-ane!"

"Everybody, line up!" At my order, my siblings line up shoulder-to-shoulder. It's something we've done for a long time.

"Good grief, having to do stuff like this even as a college student is so embarrassing. And I have clubs, too." Keita, the oldest boy, grumbles with a sarcastic smile.

"No complaining. Keita, Haru, Hina, Yūta, Kōta, Yui! You all look just as good as ever."

"It's Reika-chan! It's been ages!" My siblings surround Reika and give shouts of joy. Reika answers with a smile even as she's jostled.

I notice Yui is the only one missing. "Where's Yui?"

Keita answers. "Yui's up in her room drawing by herself."

“For Pete’s sake, she always takes everything at her own pace...” Ten years ago, Dad built an addition onto the house shortly after Yui was born. ‘Cause it was too small for the whole family to live in after they’d grown. Now there are more rooms, and I have my own room on the second floor.

Me and Reika go into my room, just the two of us.

The smile fades from Reika’s face; she looks at me with a sincere expression. “Nao, what in the world happened?”

“Why so serious? What are you talking about, Reika?”

“I suddenly remembered you, Nao. And I wanted to see you...”

“Huh? What’s the deal with that?” I smile sarcastically. But Reika remains earnest. She’s staring at my leg.

“What happened to your leg?”

“Huh...? My leg? Nothing, really...”

“There is no use in hiding it. Please, tell me what happened. Were you injured?”

I can feel my leg throbbing slightly. I didn’t want to have to mention this. “...How did you know?”

“You are brave and fast on your feet, so it was strange of you to freeze when the truck sounded its horn. Moreover, were you not looking after your leg a little when we were climbing the stairs just now?”

You can’t hide anything from Reika. She’s a quick thinker and notices things that other people don’t. That’s Reika, all right.

I have no choice. I reluctantly talk. “It’s nothing major. I just got into a little accident two years ago...”

No, there was nothing little about that accident.

~~~~~

It was a foggy night. I was on the way home from college soccer practice when Mom dashed out of the house, her face a strained colour.

She said that Yui had gone out to draw, and she didn’t know where she was. I was used to my siblings always getting lost, but the thick fog stirred up my anxiety.

The whole family looked around and shouted her name, but we didn’t find her anywhere.

I walked along the street that night at a loss of what to do when I saw Yui walking through the fog ahead of me. She was looking at her open sketchbook as she walked.

*Thank god I found her.*

The moment I thought that, a semi-truck shoved its way through. A signal-less crosswalk. Yui didn't notice the truck.

"YUI!" I shouted and desperately ran toward her. Yui didn't hear me or the truck. The shrill horn cut off my voice.

For some reason, Yui looked so happy, looking through the pages of her sketchbook.

*That Yui sure loves drawing pictures. What in the world did she draw? What is she looking at with that smile?*

As I thought that, I dashed to Yui, the fastest I'd ever ran in my life.

Yui lifted her head and finally saw the truck. But it was too late. At this rate, she'd be run over.

Just then, I saw the page on Yui's open sketchbook. It was a picture of me playing soccer, so well-drawn that it startled me.

*Yui drew something like that without me noticing? She only ever draws heroes and heroines, and yet why did she draw me of all people...?*

Of course. She drew it in secret when the whole family came to see me play soccer the other day. I was so happy she came to cheer me on at my practice game. Back then, she told me with an extraordinary smile, "*Nao-ane, you're my number one hero.*"

Oh, boy. That was kind of embarrassing.

Aah, but there was no time. Yui was going to be hit. My precious family...my adorable little sister...

*Please, God, don't take Yui's life...*

Just before the truck crashed, I thrust Yui away in the nick of time.

The sudden sound of brakes echoed around me. Yui's dropped sketchbook fluttered across the sky. Yui was unhurt. I saved her. But I was sent flying instead.

At that moment, I thought: *Oh, thank God. I saved Yui's life. I'm Yui's hero. I have to protect her to the end, no matter what it takes. I finally made her wish come true...*

The doctor told me it was a miracle I was still alive. If I had been hit anywhere else, I would've died instantly. Naturally. 'Cause that gigantic truck sent me flying.

Thanks to my exceptional reflexes, I had only just broken the bone in my right leg.

But I had to drop out of the Japan Girls' College Soccer Championship three days later; at that moment, I gave up my future as a soccer player.

I had to stay in the hospital for two months. By the time I was discharged, naturally the tournament was already over, my teammates had retired, and the juniors were in the running to make the next goal.

Even now, with the aftereffects I can't dash around like I used to. Being flooded with the light of cars on the street at night and hearing car horns takes me back to the moment of the accident. For a moment, I freeze up and can't move at all. When I was a kid, I was scared of bugs and ghosts; now that I'm an adult, a major trauma's been added to that.

~~~~~

"I had no idea something so terrible happened to you, Nao." Reika mutters after hearing my story.

"Sorry I didn't tell you anything, even though it happened two years ago already."

"We have not had the opportunity to meet up until now, so it is only natural."

I look at Reika and speak in earnest. "But I'm really glad that I saved Yui's life. 'Cause Yui is an important part of the family. If I hadn't protected her as her big sister... Besides, now I'm working hard coaching my juniors on the college soccer team. I'm doing my very best at what I can do." But then, today I heard what those juniors really think of me. My heartbreak doesn't begin to compare to the trauma of being hit, but...

"You certainly love your family and your juniors, Nao."

"Yeah. I sure do." I think that from the bottom of my heart. Reika's expression becomes slightly downcast.

"But perhaps you need to graduate from them soon."

"Huh? Graduate...?" Reika doesn't say anything after that. She just gives me a meaningful smile. I can't understand the meaning behind Reika's words. "No way! I can't graduate those. 'Cause with my family, with my soccer team – that's where I'm supposed to be, and I love 'em all..."

"Always remaining in the same place means you cannot test your limits. Sometimes one must embark to find a new self. Is that not also necessary?" Reika's vocabulary and power of persuasion have improved as an adult. She's like someone who's achieved a state of enlightenment.

As I absent-mindedly think about the meaning of her words, Reika opens her mouth again.

"By the way, there is one more thing I would like to ask you, Nao. It is very important."

“What’s the big deal?” I think maybe this is the real issue at hand.

“Do you remember Miyuki-san, Akane-san, and Yayoi-san?” Just then, my sleeping memories awaken just a little.

...Huh? I’m forgetting something important. It’s on the tip of my tongue now, but what could it be...? “Miyuki, Akane, Yayoi...I feel like I’ve heard of them before, but, uhh...”

“You do not remember, do you?” Reika peers at my face to make sure.

“Nope, sorry. Who are they again?” Reika looks around my room. On the bookshelf in front of her she sees, mixed among the soccer magazines and coaching guides I’ve bought, a movie DVD. It’s an entertaining production called *Yōkai All-Stars DX*, combining a historical setting with special effects. When I was a 2nd-year student, me and my class friends went on a field trip to a historical movie village. We stumbled on the set of this exact movie, and by chance the director happened to take a liking to us, and we got to be in the movie. And we weren’t just extras – all my friends ignored the script and set the story protecting Reika, playing the part of the princess.

Huh? Wait a minute, who are those friends in the movie that I went on the field trip with again? I feel like there were definitely three more besides Reika, but why can’t I remember them?

Reika uses the remote to fast-forward to the last scene on the DVD, and the credits roll.

The names of the cast and crew are listed. Even though we weren’t in the movie all that much, sure enough, our names and roles are there. Besides me and Reika, there’s ‘Hoshizora Miyuki’, ‘Hino Akane’, and ‘Kise Yayoi’...

Once the movie is over, Reika turns to me and says, “They are our precious friends from our class.”

At that moment, I remember. The five of us were the best of friends; we did everything together. Us five ran together in the relay, too.

And the other day, I reunited with Yayoi-chan at the park...*she’s* the writer of Yui’s beloved *Miracle Peace*. It’s thanks to Yayoi-chan’s manga that Yui has faith in herself and can go forward one step at a time. Yayoi sure was moved when I told her that. “Oh, man, how could I have forgotten?”

“Just as I thought, you as well, Nao...” Reika stares into space, lost in thought.

“What do you mean ‘just as I thought’?”

“I had also forgotten. About you, and about Miyuki-san and the others...”

“Huh?”

“However, on one occasion, I realised some of my memories were being omitted. Do you not think that strange? Why would we forget about such precious friends? Even my own childhood friend that I have known since I was young... It is unnatural to forget. I came to see you, Nao, to investigate the cause.”

I’m horrified. It’s not just my memories disappearing, but Reika’s too...? How is something like that even possible?

Just then, I hear from outside the room, “Nao-ane! Dinner’s ready!” It’s Haru. Lately her cooking’s improved; she’s been able to replicate Mom Curry perfectly.

“Coming!” There, the conversation is interrupted.

Sitting around the household dinner table with Reika, we make our memories of our middle school days bloom. The nights of our overnight trip to Kyoto and Osaka, having pillow fights and talking about our crushes; holding a fashion show for the cultural festival; all cheering Reika on when she decided to run for Student Council President...

But up until the very end, I can’t wipe the uneasiness of this hunch that I’m still forgetting something serious.

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The next day, the university Soccer Club has the day off of practice, so I go out to do my shopping for dinner early. Once I finish shopping in the shopping district, I take a leisurely stroll in the park.

Honestly, I’m relieved that there’s no soccer practice today. After hearing what my juniors really thought of me last night, I don’t have the confidence to deal with them like I usually do.

Walking around the park, I notice Yui sitting on a bench. She’s taken her sketchbook out of her backpack and opened it to draw a picture. I remember that Yui usually draws on her way home from school.

*Great timing. We can go home together.* I think as I walk up to her.

A group of three boys with backpacks, apparently Yui’s classmates, approach her. One of the boys takes away her sketchbook, grinning.

“Ahh! Don’t look!” Yui rushes to try and get it back, but it’s too late. She had been drawing a picture of *Miracle Peace*.

“Eww, lame! This loser draws manga.”

“Even when she’s in high school, she’s still gonna be drawing.”

“Midorikawas really do stay little kids forever.” The boys’ sneers echo. Yui bites her lip hard in frustration.



In my irritation, I immediately walk over to them.

“Hey! Three men crowding around a little girl is unfair! If you’ve got something to say to my sister, you’ll have to say it to us both!”

The boys are startled by the threat and, muttering to themselves, “This is bad”, push the sketchbook back to me and run away at full speed.

I sigh as I see them off. “Sheesh, what’s their deal?” Yui isn’t good at dealing with people, so her classmates at school tease her a lot. Lately since she’s had a knack for drawing, she should be happy to find a place in school where she fits in, but it sounds like mean kids like these are still picking fights...

I turn around to face Yui. “Are you okay, Yui? Let’s go home together.” But Yui hangs her head and stiffens. “Are you worried about what those jerks said? Come on, there’s nothing to worry about. They’re just jealous ‘cause you’re such a good artist. They’re at the age where they like to tease cute girls. And maybe they’re jealous they don’t have a cool big sister like me? Ahahaha...”

“That’s not it...” Yui interrupts me. Her tone sounds different from usual.

“Huh?”

“I can’t depend on you to come help, Nao-ane... Stop butting in all the time.” Her voice trembles slightly.

“Yui...what happened at school?” She curtly takes the sketchbook back and looks off into the distance. “If there’s something you wanna say, let’s talk about it.”

Yui isn’t good at putting her thoughts into words. But she faces me in earnest and opens her heart. She starts talking, bit-by-bit. “I listened to what my friends were saying about me in school today... I always rely on you. Even now that I’m in fourth grade, I can’t do anything without you around. The family spoils me ‘cause I’m the youngest...”

“What? That’s the problem? You don’t need to worry about what those morons say.”

“But I thought about it. Maybe they’re right. I’ve depended on you too much until now, Nao-ane. It’s my fault that you have to go through so much trouble...”

“You’re not any trouble. It’s only natural for a big sister to worry about her little sister, right?” That’s really how I feel. But Yui continues.

“But it’s my fault you got in that accident... I was supposed to get hit by the truck back then—”

“YUI! THAT’S ENOUGH!”

Yui finally shuts her mouth. Before long, I see tears well up in her eyes. “I’m sorry, Nao-ane. I’m really happy that you worry about me. But as long as you’re around, I’m gonna be a dumb little kid forever... So please...don’t butt in for me anymore. I can do everything by myself... I’m not a kid anymore... I don’t need you poking your nose in my business!”

Then she tightly clutches her sketchbook to her chests, turns her back to me, and runs home alone. Frozen in shock, I can only watch Yui from behind.

~~~~~

I have a strange memory. It’s about the day Yui was born ten years ago.

While Mom was on her way to the hospital to give birth, I looked after my little brothers and sisters in her place. I thought I should try to replicate Mom Curry; after we did all the shopping, I only realised it once it was time to cook – I had forgotten an apple, the secret ingredient.

But then I realised that my sister Hina and my brother Yūta were gone from the house. They had snuck out together to buy an apple. I was used to them getting lost, but I couldn’t find them no matter where I looked, and I worried, so worried... When I found them both safe by the riverbank, I was relieved from the bottom of my heart.

But it’s weird. I feel like back then, somebody kidnapped the two of them and I put my life on the line to save them... What the heck happened back then? Who kidnapped my brother and sister, and how did I rescue them?

Earlier, when I told Kōta that story, he had this to say: “Nao-ane, you transformed and beat the bad guy.”

“...Transformed? What are you talking about?”

“You transformed into a superheroine and rescued us.”

My other siblings add their own comments. “I saw that, too! Nao-ane, you were so cool!”

“That was a super weird dream...”

Kōta’s words made me make a fool of myself.

“What? This is all about a dream? Geez, don’t scare me like that...”

But that’s not the only thing that’s strange. My siblings say they all had the same dream when they were there. They all insist they dreamed about me transforming and fighting. Is something that weird even possible?

What happened that day must be the key to the memories I’ve lost. I feel it in my gut.

Besides, I know just one thing for sure.

On that day, at that moment, I mustered up enough courage to save my siblings. I put my life on the line for my family. That feeling alone is carved into my heart without a doubt.

And on that day, she was born. An irreplaceable life... My beloved Yui...

~~~~~

The cool night breeze blows through the garden.

As I gaze up absent-mindedly at the starry sky in the garden front, I remember my conversation with Yui this afternoon.

Yui, who I've doted on ever since she was born...Yui, who was timid and no good at talking with people...Yui, who loved drawing and opened her heart little-by-little...

*"Nao-ane, you're my number one hero."*

My beloved Yui, who told me that when she came to watch my soccer practice two years ago...

After she got home, she shut herself up in her room and won't come out.

As Yui's big sister, I've interfered too much in her life. I wonder how I should act, what I should say around her from now on...

I let out a big sigh and hang my head.

Right now, there's a sealed letter in my hand. It's from some team from the Tokyo Nadeshiko League; they approached me about working as their assistant coach before. Another offer has come from their team office.

If I were to accept the position as coach, I'd have to leave Nanairogaoka and live in Tokyo. I'd have to separate from my family, my alma mater, and my juniors. I'd have to embark, leaving Yui behind. I can't do something that irresponsible. Besides, I love this town and my family and my juniors more than anything...

But...

I hear the routine sound of planing.

Dad is planing under the stars. His wide back sways when he quietly moves the plane back and forth. Each time, he carves thin strips of wood like bonito flakes. It's rare to see Dad planing at home. I'm spontaneously captivated by the sight.

How cool. I thought there wasn't such a thing as a perfect adult, but Dad is always resolute and doesn't seem to worry about anything. Will I be an adult like that someday, too?

Noticing me looking, Dad stops his work and turns to face me. “You wanna try, Nao?” He says, roughly holding the plane out.

“Huh? Nah, I’m good.”

“Come on, just do it.” Dad hands me the plane before I can answer. Looks like I’m taking it for a test run.

Well, then I don’t have a choice. Dad won’t listen once he’s already said something...

I reluctantly start planing as Dad watches in front of me. But I can’t carve neatly like he can. The wood shavings break in the middle.

Dad, with a face like a teacher’s, stares at me with folded arms. “Looks like yer hesitatin’.”

Dad sees right through me, and I huff. “There’s nothing I can do about it. ‘Cause it’s been years since I planed anything...” *So it’s unrelated to my heart’s hesitation.* That’s what I want to say, but I can’t hit the mark.

“Focus. Then you should be able to carve neat, like your straightforward personality.”

“I know, I know.” I try so hard to concentrate that I get impatient and can’t do it. Yui crosses my mind.

“Talk to the wood. Don’t just put your strength into it at random.” Like a Zen riddle, I honestly can’t understand what my dad says.

*Talk to the wood?* What does that even mean? Ahh, I just don’t get it. I can’t carve well at all and my hands are getting numb; I never wanted to be a carpenter in the first place...

I give up and return the plane; Dad grins. “Good grief, givin’ up already?”

I try to ask my dad for advice with all my might. “Hey, Dad. Do you think I poke my nose into people’s business?”

“What’s all this outta the blue?” Uninterested, Dad turns away and starts planing again.

“Yui said that to me this afternoon. Yesterday, the juniors at the Soccer Club said the same thing... I don’t know what to do, hearing the people I trusted saying things like that... I thought I was doing the right thing until now, but was it too much?”

It’s rare for me to confess how I really feel to my dad like this. But tonight is special. “Here I was thinkin’ you were all grown up, but you really are still a little brat to be frettin’ over stuff like that.”

“Don’t talk to me like that. I really am worried...” I puff my cheeks.

“I told ya. No reason to be reckless wit’ yer strength. Same goes for mankind. Ain’t puttin’ some distance between each other and watchin’ over them from a distance love, too?” I watch Dad from behind as he keeps planing. “And Nao, you got your own life. You gotta reach ahead to an honest future. If you stay here forever, you’re never gonna push your limits.”

At that moment, I remember what Reika said last night.

*“Always remaining in the same place means you cannot test your limits. Sometimes one must embark to find a new self. Is that not also necessary?”*

To finish, Dad said, “Look straight ahead. Then the answer’ll come naturally.” I etch those words into my heart, and my gaze falls onto the envelope in my hand.

Inside myself, I make certain of a decision.

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As I sit on the park bench, I see Yui drawing in her sketchbook on the way home from school again today.

I watch over Yui from the shade of one of the park’s trees.

Then the same three bratty classmates from yesterday come. Having learned nothing, they approach Yui, grinning. “Yo, Midorikawa. Whatcha drawin’ today? Show us.” They say and take her sketchbook.

I see the picture in the sketchbook, too, looking from my shady tree. It’s not a picture of *Miracle Peace*; it’s a portrait of me.

“What?! It’s your scary big sis?”

“You really are a little kid. You can’t do anything without your sister, huh?” Their laughter echoes throughout the park.

Yui listens to what the boys say, her hands curling into tight fists.

I frantically hold back the urge to rush over, and cheer Yui on in my heart.

Yui’s lips move faintly as she hangs her head. “...Give it back.”

The faces of the laughing boys turn serious. “...Hah? What did ya just say? I can’t hear.”

At that moment Yui gets up, faces the three boys, and shouts. “Give it back! I’m doing this alone, without my sister here, so stop making fun of me!” Pressured by her force, the boys give the sketchbook back and leave, grumbling.

Yui clutches the sketchbook to her chest and breathes heavily.

I come out from the shady tree and approach her. “Yui.” She turns around, startled; her eyes are watering. “You did great. I’m impressed.” I smile, and Yui turns red, embarrassed.

And her big, clear eyes look right at me. “Nao-ane, sorry I was so mean yesterday. I’m fine without you... I wanted you to have some peace of mind... That’s why I said all that. I’m okay on my own.”

I stroke Yui’s cheek. “I know. I’m the one who should be apologizing for not noticing how you felt, Yui. You’re stronger than I thought. You’re not a kid anymore.” And then I tell Yui about the decision I made last night. “Yui...I’m thinking of leaving home.” Yui looks up at me, shocked. “Tokyo’s team in the Nadeshiko Leagues has asked me to coach for them.”

“Really? That’s so cool!”

“They’ve been sending me invites for a long time, but I’ve finally decided. I’m gonna accept. But for that, I gotta leave home and live in Tokyo. From now on, I’m gonna live by myself, away from all of you.” Yui listens to my words, giving me a sincere look. “My family is a precious place to me. Not just you, Yui. Keita, Haru, Hina, Yūta, Kōta, even Dad and Mom... I love all of you. But I can’t stay here forever. I need to be a new me. So I think I’m going to graduate from the family.”

Not just from my family. From the town of Nanairogaoka, from my alma mater’s Soccer Club...embarking from all the places I’ve gotten close to until now is a big decision for me.

But just like dad said, as long as I look straight ahead, the answer will come naturally. As long as I have courage, the future will open up to me.

I notice Yui is about to cry, and hug her close to me. “There’s nothing to worry about. I won’t be gone forever. And even if I’m not here, you have your big brothers and sisters here, right? And Dad and Mom.”

“Yeah...it’s okay...I’m okay.” Yui sobs into my arms.

I let Yui go, and she looks right at me and says, “Because someday, I want to protect you, Nao-ane.”

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I tell my juniors at the university’s Soccer Club about the situation, and about my farewell.

Everyone is stunned at the sudden decision, but I leave my lovely juniors with some last words of encouragement. “The future of Nanairogaoka International University’s Soccer Club lies on your shoulders. From now on, it’s up to you!”

Captain Arisa answers with an energetic, “Yes, ma’am!”, and the other club members agree.

These girls’ future, these girls’ confidence will open up. I believe in all of them. Someday I hope some of them make it into Nadeshiko Japan...

At first my little siblings are sad about my leaving, but they all support me. They hold a grand “*Nao-ane Farewell Party*” for me, and each one has their own parting words to give to me.

“This is all so grandiose. I’m not gonna be that far away...” Even with my joking smile, I’m overflowing with tears of joy. My siblings don’t get the chance to bless me like this outside of my birthday. Everyone coming together gives me courage.

I tell my dad. “Dad, I decided to follow your advice and look straight ahead for an answer. Thanks.”

But Dad hides his embarrassment under a sarcastic smile and says, “Givin’ you advice wasn’t my plan. You decided fer yerself.”

...*Seriously?* Geez, he’s never upfront with how he feels.

My siblings all pool their pocket money together to buy me a present.

That evening, I go back to my room and unwrap the present. Inside is a cosmetic compact with an adorable design. My siblings said it’s a must-have for any grown-up woman. They’re right; up to now I’ve been so devoted to soccer that I haven’t had many chances to wear makeup.

As I think that and look at the compact, I suddenly feel a sense of nostalgia. I have a hunch that way, way back, somebody gave me a compact and I was reborn as a new me.

But it’s strange. I never put on makeup with the compact as a kid, so what the heck did I use it for?

I stare at the compact and think, and then I remember. The *Greatest Smile* picture book.

That’s right! The compact was a picture in it. The five main characters – Miyuki, Akane, Yayoi, Nao, and Reika – all used the compacts they got from Candy from Märchenland to transform into the legendary warriors PreCure.

But wait a minute... That’s a fantasy picture book. Why do I feel this nostalgic about it? Even if the Nao in the book was modelled after me...

But I definitely used a compact ten years ago. I used it to transform into a different self. A different self? That couldn’t be...

Just then, I hear a voice.

“...PreCure...!”

Huh? PreCure? Where is this voice coming from?

I frantically look around the room. Sounds like the voice is calling for help. Whoever it is, if they're in trouble I have to help them. The moment I think that, I hear it again.

“...PreCure, help ~kuru!...”

Candy! There's no doubt. It's Candy, the fairy who's in *The Greatest Smile*.

Why is Candy's voice...

Just then, a wind blows in from the cracked-open window, making the curtains flutter violently. The wind caresses my cheek. Like it's trying to tell me something...

At that moment, my sleeping memories awaken. Something happened ten years ago, on the day Yui was born...

After not knowing where my little sister Hina and my little brother Yūta were, I found both of them on the riverbank. They had been captured by Majorīna. Majorīna was one of the generals of the Bad End Kingdom, and a bad guy who wanted to bring the world to a Bad End.

She took my brother and sister hostage and backed me into a corner, but I couldn't reveal my identity to my siblings. But I wanted to protect my precious family...

I made my decision and took out the compact. And I transformed into PreCure right in front of my brother and sister.

Impossible, you say? But my siblings all say they had the same dream. Besides, the memories have been completely restored, too.

I was a PreCure when I was a middle-schooler. The compact my siblings gave me brought back my memories of the real me.

“...Nao!...”

Hey! Candy is calling me, too. I don't know why, but some time ago I lost my memories of being a PreCure. Now Candy is calling for help again. I have to go.

The room's bookshelf suddenly starts overflowing with light. A brilliant light pours out from behind the soccer magazines and coaching guides.

Of course, the Book Door! If I take out the door, it'll lead me to another world. My best friends are waiting for me.



I can still hear my siblings' voices from the living room. Yui is showing off the pictures in her sketchbook, and Mom is praising her work.

I turn toward the living room and tell them in my heart. *Everybody...see you later.*

I face the bookshelf again. For a moment, Yui's face flashes in my head.

Yui...she'll be fine, right? Even if I'm not around, she has her family here to support her. I have my own world, and I'm going to achieve what I should achieve.

I won't hesitate anymore. The time has come to embark so I can be the real me. As long as I look straight ahead, the answer will come naturally.

The next moment, my body is engulfed in light, and I'm sucked into the bookshelf. I slowly fall down into a space of light.

The other dimension ahead of here is called...the Mysterious Library. Us PreCure gathered there and talked together. Using the Book Door, we travelled all around the world. Vivid memories of dashing across Mongolian plains and the Great Wall of China come back to me.

I want to hurry up and see my friends. When the five of us are together, nothing can break us, and we can keep on moving forward.

With anticipation and courage in my heart, I fall through the light to the Mysterious Library.

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### *Chapter 5 – Aoki Reika*

*The lifetime of an individual – it is the same as bearing a heavy burden as it is walking down the distant path.*

It is a vital expression I have etched into my heart.

People face numerous hardships in their lives. They may become crushed by immense pressure, or may even resign themselves midway. They may lose their way at times, and may so much as lose sight of their path, perhaps. However, whether it is an empty land that lays before you, whether it is a steep hill, if you can come to believe in yourself and walk on, then surely the path can be opened. It is only with your own will can the path be carved, so is it not courteous to say that is it worth the march? It does not have to be accomplished alone, especially if it can be done together with trusted companions...

Are you perhaps getting tired of my somewhat rigid sentences? Please excuse me for this. In order to better understand me, I thought that it would be the most adequate introduction for the circumstance.

Since this will take a short amount of your time, I would like to kindly ask you to hear about a strange event that has happened to me. It may sound very implausible. Allow me to explain one step at a time from the very beginning.

Forgive me for the delay. My name – please call me Aoki Reika.

At present, I am 24 years old. While overbearing, I am serving as the homeroom teacher for Class 2-1 of Nanairogaoka Middle School.

The subject I teach is Language Arts. For extracurricular activities, I concurrently serve as an adviser of the Archery Club and the Calligraphy Club. That said, I am still a fledgling newcomer both as a teacher and as a working adult. I strive to encourage studying with my pupils, honing their minds with club activities, and to help each of them discover the path they should walk.

*‘Think of important matters for yourself; decide for yourself’* —that is the motto of our class.

I, myself, am also a graduate of this school. About ten years ago, I studied here, carved open my way, and set my sights on the path of a teacher. Witnessing the pupils studying now, seeing the image of them nurturing their friendship...it reminds me of myself from ten years past, causing the inner corner of my eyes to run hot.

I had returned to my own school, so that I can accumulate memories once more in the same location. Do you suppose there to be any other such occupations as emotionally touching as this?

It is under my family’s influence that I came to value the phrase called the *‘Path’*.

My grandfather, *Aoki Sōtarō*, is a master of calligraphy. I was likewise influenced by him, having been studying calligraphy since my early childhood. Under the guidance of my strict grandfather, I received the teachings not just about the arts of calligraphy, but also one's frame of mind, namely the importance of the '*Path*'.

My name '*Reika*' is written in the kanji '*graceful flower*'. My grandfather included that he wished I would '*grow to be a woman who carries elegance and grace in heart and soul like a flower*'. True beauty is not the appearance, it is what dwells in the heart. That is what I believe to be so.

My grandfather, he is a man of character who always looks at everything in a resolute manner. As if to say...the things about family, even the things about this world, it seems as if he is seeing into all the underlying principles. For me, you might say he gives the impression that he is a master of the mind.

That is why, when my grandfather suddenly collapsed one day, I could no longer hide my turmoil.

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"—Aoki-sensei?" Marking some tests, I am pulled back into reality by that voice. Before I knew it, it seems I had been in a deep state of thought while staring at the test papers.

The Staff Room of Nanairogaoka Middle School. It is already night, with many of the students having gone home after finishing their extracurricular activities. The majority of teachers have already left to return home, and so there are only a few remaining in the Staff Room, including me.

"Is something wrong? You were in a daze, but..." The voice calling out to me, it is the head of 2nd-year students – Sasaki Namie-sensei.

Sasaki-sensei...she was my homeroom teacher during my time as a 2nd-year in middle school. After she got married since then, Sasaki-sensei had taken maternity and childcare leave, and with her back now, she can demonstrate her skills as a head of year. For me, who is but a novice still, I want to be equivalent to senpai as both a teacher and as a human being.

"It is nothing. I was just lost in thought a little..." When I give a smile, Sasaki-sensei sets on my desk some tea that she had kindly brought with her.

"Don't overwork yourself. You've been giving it your all on everything since the time you were a middle-schooler, Aoki-sensei."

"True. I appreciate the concern." I was once referred to as '*Aoki-san*', but with the teacher now addressing me as '*Aoki-sensei*', it feels strange. "To be honest..." Realising my gloomy expression, however, the smile also on Sasaki-sensei's face vanishes. "My grandfather's condition is unwell."

“Oh dear, your grandfather?”

“He was hospitalised the other day. I am anxious over his health...” It was the other day when my grandfather, who had collapsed in the family household, was urgently transported to the hospital. My mother sees him at the hospital every day, so she will immediately contact us if something were to happen. Even so, my heart does not calm.

“That’s very worrying. Have you gone to visit yet?”

“No, not yet...”

“You should go tomorrow, at least. I’ll manage the school side of things for you.”

“Thank you very much. But still, it is fine.”

“I see... Well then, I’ll...go on ahead, so you better go home as soon as possible.”

“Yes. Much appreciated.” Sasaki-sensei exits the Staff Room.

Lowering my head, I resume the marking of tests. However, I immediately think upon my grandfather, and thus the hand moving the pen comes to a halt.

Taking a mighty deep breath, I try once more to mark them given the chance.

“...Aoki-sensei.” Sasaki-sensei, who should have went home, returns to the Staff Room. Judging by her urgent facial expression, I realise this is no trivial matter. Perhaps, my grandfather has... “Could you come out for a minute? The school principal is calling.”

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When I enter the principal’s office together with Sasaki-sensei, the elderly school principal has been anticipating us while restlessly pacing about his desk. When he notices our arrival, the principal turns with a pale expression.

“Awfully late, aren’t you?”

“Not at all. What is it?” I thought that my grandfather’s condition has taken a sudden turn, but it appears to be different. I am relieved of that aspect.

The principal presents to me an envelope that is now placed atop his desk. “This thing...was found in the school letterbox.”

The principal seems to be feigning serenity; I can sense the disturbance in his voice. Sasaki-sensei seems to be already aware of the circumstance, keeping a steady watch behind me.

I look within the white envelope. It contains only a single sheet of white paper. On it, similar to a warning notice in the same vein as those out of TV drama and movies, there is a sentence made by cutting and pasting letters from newspapers and leaflets.

*‘AOKI REIKA-SENSEI OF CLASS 2-1, YOU CANNOT SEE INTO THE STUDENTS’ HEARTS WHATSOEVER. IF YOU DO NOT QUIT BEING A HOMEROOM TEACHER, I WILL LEAVE THIS SCHOOL.’*

I am at a loss for words.

This certain ‘Aoki Reika-sensei’ mentioned here is...referring to me...? Naturally, I cannot think of any other. However, I cannot be expected to accept the sentence before my eyes as fact.

*I cannot see into the students’ hearts? If I do not quit being a homeroom teacher, one will leave school? Who in the world would do such a thing...*

When I came to, I am being supported by Sasaki-sensei to be seated on the principal’s office sofa. Realising my distress, Sasaki-sensei lays her hand on my shoulder.

Flipping over both the envelope and the paper, the sender is, of course, not written.

Finally, from the back of my throat, I squeeze out a rasping voice. “The sender...?”

“I haven’t the faintest. It appears...it was placed inside the letterbox directly, but as for any clues...” So he says, with the principal sat on the sofa opposite to me. Taking out my handkerchief, I incessantly wipe the sweat off my forehead.

The neighbouring Sasaki-sensei stoically stares at me; her mouth opens before long. “I don’t think we should jump to conclusions, but...Aoki-sensei...do you happen to know the student who put this in?”

“I do not know. If it is one of the pupils of Class 2-1, I cannot imagine who in the world it could be to do such a thing...” Those are my true feelings.

Having served as the homeroom teacher for the students of Class 2-1, from everyone I know, there is only the unending vigorous smiles of the students. Naturally, there are pupils who can study, pupils who cannot, pupils who are bustling, pupils who are docile...there are pupils with a variety of personalities. Altogether, the number of boys and girls in total is 30. Every one of them is precious to me as pupils. I question if someone among them could have possibly done this...

The principal is still wiping off his sweat. “Indeed... Aoki-sensei, you are a truly brilliant teacher. You face your pupils in earnest, and you have a great sense of trust. *‘Think of important matters for yourself; decide for yourself’*...with such a splendid goal established, the pupils are as carefree as they are studying. I think about how they also proactively devote their time to after-school club activities, to which I admire greatly. As for comments in regards to you – absolutely nothing has reached me as principal until now. From the students, or even the parents... It is unlikely that, in your particular case, you could ever provoke antipathy like this from a pupil...”

“And yet, this sort of thing delivered at present is a fact.”

“No-no, we have yet to come to a conclusion if it was the actions of a student in Class 2-1. There is also the possibility the pupil is of another class. In addition, it may just be a practical joke caused by impulsiveness. No, perhaps it isn’t the work of a pupil of this school to begin with...” The principal’s tone indicate confusion.

“But considering the security of our school, it is hard to imagine an outsider could have trespassed for the express purpose of putting this in...”

“Mm, certainly...” So the school principal says, falling back into silence.

“Principal, what should we do? This is a very delicate issue. As a head of year myself, together with Aoki-sensei we will resolve this and—”

“No.” I interrupt Sasaki-sensei’s words. “Would it not be satisfactory to entrust me to deal with it?”

The school principal and Sasaki-sensei, they both gaze upon me in astonishment. “Aoki-sensei...what do you mean?”

“This is an issue with my class. All responsibility rests upon me as the homeroom teacher. Disregard taking time from the other teachers – I want to solve this by myself.”

“But...”

“This may be a trial I have to overcome as a teacher. Please.” At that point, we do not have anything for a good plan to solve the situation. It’s just...I felt like this is an issue that I have to decipher without my reliance on anyone.

I do not want to believe it, but perhaps this letter was sent by someone among the pupils in Class 2-1. It may be an SOS sent out to me. I must face them, if true. I have to respond to the voice in the pupil’s heart. That is my mission as a teacher. Thus, my mind is made up.

The school principal, after breathing a deep sigh, speaks his mind. “Understood. Well then, this issue shall be left to Aoki-sensei. *Provided*...that you will report to me and Sasaki-sensei about the situation in detail, please.”

Sasaki-sensei resumes again. “Ask us for advice if anything happens. Okay?”

“Yes. Thank you very much.” I rise up, and silently bow my head low.

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To be suspicious of individuals...is a very cruel thing. It is all the more reason to indubitably trust in others...

However, this is a situation I brought upon myself, thus, it is an issue I have elected to solve alone.

Since the next day, I have been keeping a watchful eye on the pupils now more than ever. The morning homeroom, break time, during class, during cleaning... Exchanging greetings with the students, listening to conversations, observing facial expressions, and partaking in nonchalant gossips...

Each time the usual message would pass by my head. However, the 30 pupils have not seen anything in peculiar so far. If I am greeted with a smile, I would give an energetic greeting in return. If I am being addressed, I would give an honest reply. The classroom is, as always, brimming with smiles.

But, those smiles are false, for behind the eyes hide their true invisible nature. Within their hearts, therein lies a hidden hatred against me. Pondering on that as so, my heart cannot so much as calm.

Even now, that pupil is glaring at me behind one's smile. The thought of being ashamed is welling inside. Are there no effective means of any kind I could use...?

After some consideration, I decide to distribute papers in the homeroom after class.

Gazing upon the papers with nothing written, the pupils look puzzled. I utter, "On your paper, everyone, please write anything you want to write. It can be things you normally worry about, things you are having a hard time telling the teacher directly, or you can use this opportunity to ask a question...anything is fine."

The pupils are beside themselves with perplexity on their faces. "But...suddenly saying that out of the blue..."

"If I have something I want to tell the teacher, I should say it directly...?"

"Yeah-yeah-yeah! Hey, I have a question! Sensei, do you have a boyfriend? What type of man is he?"

"Err, does this affect our grades or getting to college?"

"It has nothing to do with grades or getting into higher education. I may not have listened to the voice in everyone's hearts until now. Having thought it over, I prepared this opportunity. It does not matter if it is anonymous. Everyone, please write down what is honestly on your minds."

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My intention to have the students confront their hearts in such a way...might had been frivolous.

After school, I began reviewing the collected papers one-by-one in the Staff Room. Yet, all that has been written...is nothing but silly things. Some students have enquires concerning class subjects. A certain student is asking for advice about love. And one is about a manga I like... There is not so much as a single thing in particular that seems to hint to a clue.

I sigh as I continue to check. To start, it is hard to imagine the pupil to divulge what is in one's mind so easily like that, especially after sending such an elaborate message. I contemplate that I have to change my approach. This is by no means a clever idea to say the least, however.

At that moment, I am taken by surprise. On the last sheet of paper, a certain sentence has been written: *'Aoki Reika-sensei of Class 2-1, you cannot see into the students' hearts whatsoever. If you do not quit being a homeroom teacher, I will leave this school.'*

I felt the blood quickly drain from my face. It is the same sentence as the message that arrived to school.

I am certain of it. As suspected, that pupil who sent that threat-like letter...is truly in my class. I did not want to believe it, but I can doubt it no more. They wrote the exact same sentence as that message...is that pupil intending to provoke me, perhaps?

I give the characters written on it a closer look. In my experience studying calligraphy, if I assess the students' penmanship, it would not be difficult to see who wrote it. The handwriting expresses the human heart. If there are 30 students, then there are 30 types of penmanship, each of which is emanating with the writer's heart and disposition.

The characters are very easy to read and carefully written. At first glance, it does not seem like the lettering of a pupil who is troubled. However, there is indeed a familiarity to it. This handwriting, I am certain it–

“Aoki-sensei.” Unexpectedly called out from behind, I look over my shoulder holding my breath.

Serving as Class Representative of Class 2-1 is Irie-kun, who looks into my face with a smile. “Pardon me, I did not realise you were there. Do you need something?” I turn over the paper atop my desk in a hurry.

“Here is my class logbook.”

“Thank you for your hard work as always.” Receiving the logbook, I smile in return.

Irie-kun has an older brother who, ten years ago, when I was but a 2<sup>nd</sup>-year student of this school, once served as Student Council President. He has excellent grades similar to his older sibling. He has tremendous popularity from the pupils and he, as of present, is even acting as Vice-President of the Student Council. For extracurricular activities, he is a member of the Archery Club where I serve as an adviser, for he shoulders the role as head of the club members.

“Oh, yes. Irie-kun, you had written a composition of *The Path* recently – it was quite wonderful. Your writing has a certain mysterious charm that touches the people's hearts.”



“I owe it to your guidance, Sensei.” The other day, in a Language Arts lesson, I had provided homework in which they were free to write a story titled *The Path*.

To put it briefly – though some call it *The Path*, *The Way* can be diverse. Centring on any manner of dramatis personae, its originality shall be tested. Of the 30 students of Class 2-1, 30 ways had the story of *The Path* been spun, to which they were given a presentation for class. Among them was Irie-kun’s whose work proved outstanding.

“As a representative of this school, I had thought about applying your work to a national contest. How about it?”

“I would be honoured. Thank you very much.” Irie-kun is delighted, silently bowing his head low. “Well then, see you tomorrow.” I turn around back to my desk. However, it seems Irie-kun has something to do still, with him standing in wait behind me. “Um...Sensei, it’s a little bit hard to ask this, but...”

“What is it?”

When Irie-kun surveys the Staff Room, he draws closer to my ear, and asks in a whisper, “Could it be, Sensei, that something’s troubling you?”

Unnerved as I am, I try not to make my unrest known when feigning serenity. “Why do you ask? Nothing of note so far has been troubling me as your teacher...”

Irie-kun gives a glance at the pile of papers on top of the desk. “Please don’t dodge the question. Those papers you handed out in the homeroom earlier today... You suddenly said, ‘*please write anything you want*’, except that isn’t like you, Aoki-sensei. You’re not troubled over something about us students, are you? Because lately, Sensei, you seem to be up and down somewhat...”

As expected of the Student Council Vice-President idolised by all. It appears he is well attuned to the change in my heart. Nevertheless, I answer with a smile. “It will be all right for me. I appreciate the concern.”

“That’s fine if you say so, but... I heard about you from my brother. He said Aoki-sensei’s been working hard ever since she was a middle-schooler, and he said you were the type to take on things by yourself. Please don’t overdo it too much.”

“Thank you. Best regards to your older brother, too.”

“Sure thing. Well then, excuse me.” Irie-kun bows his head right before departing from the Staff Room.

Despite feeling relieved, I open the class logbook Irie-kun had brought into my possession. Consequently, I notice something that is particularly hard to believe.

I question what this mean. Written in this logbook is Irie-kun’s beautiful handwriting...that is, there is a close resemblance to the characters written on that paper.

*It cannot be, is Irie-kun... How can...*

I further locate the composition of *The Path* he has written...the handwriting checks out. There is a resemblance after all.

*But, it is impossible. He is the Vice-President of the Student Council, the Class Representative, the head of the Archery Club, adored by students and teachers as well as by anyone who idolises Irie-kun...*

Once more, I carefully compare the penmanship. And yet, the more I look, the more there is a resemblance.

Incidentally, I remember.

Before, Sasaki-sensei spoke to me about something. Most recently, the hearts of middle-schoolers are complex and hard to understand.

The number of stereotypical problem children of old have diminished. But, the pupil who seemingly has no problems of any kind, the pupil with excellent grades; the pupil who is bright and beloved by everyone, the good boy fond by teachers...actually carries a deep-seated darkness in his heart.

Irie-kun is respected by students and teachers, however, even for a student such as himself, nobody can see inside his heart. The truth might hold a deeper darkness than anyone knows. The truth behind that tender smile on his face...might have been him smirking at me.

Pondering that far, I shake off the notion. What a harsh thing to even consider. It seems like my mind is exhausted. Of all things, to think that the one who provided care for me...Irie-kun...is the sender of that letter...

Perhaps it is my imagination that the handwriting is similar. Surely that is the case. I cease any further investigation. And so, my mind is made up.

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I quickly come to my senses.

It has become pitch black in the room of Class 2-1; it would seem I fell asleep at the teacher's desk. *Is it already late at night so soon?* The stars shining in the sky outside the window can be seen. Naturally, there are no pupils in the classroom.

I wonder why I – me, of all people – fell asleep in such a place. *I have to quickly hurry home... Actually, what in the world could the time be right now?* I seemingly thought, and looking at my wristwatch, I become speechless.

The hands of the clock are rotating round and round at high speed. When I raise my eyes to the clock hanging on the wall of the classroom, it is likewise rotating the same way continuously.

That is when I notice. Written on the blackboard with beautiful handwriting, is that sentence not...

'AOKI REIKA-SENSEI OF CLASS 2-1, YOU CANNOT SEE INTO THE STUDENTS' HEARTS WHATSOEVER. IF YOU DO NOT QUIT BEING A HOMEROOM TEACHER, I WILL LEAVE THIS SCHOOL.'

The large characters are just about to protrude off the blackboard.

In that moment, I shudder in fear.

Inside the classroom where I thought there to be no-one, only the silhouette of a single person can be seen. At the pupil's desk, alone, someone is sitting there looking this way. However, the face could not be clearly seen given the dark classroom.

The seat positioned exactly in the centre of the room. That seat belongs to, if I recall correctly... "—Irie-kun?" I timidly enquire.

The shadowy figure answers, *'hihi-hihi-hi'*, expressing an eerie laughter as he stands up.

—No. It is not Irie-kun.

"Weeell, how do you do? It's been a while, hasn't it..."

I feel as if I have heard that familiar-sounding voice from somewhere.

Illuminated by the moonlight shining in from the window, the figure comes into view: Ominously-pointed tips on the shoes, a tongue emerging from his mouth and licking his lips, and a form similar to the joker on a playing card...

"You are..." A sudden memory resurfaces. During my period as a middle-schooler, one of my classmates showed to me an original picture book creation called *The Greatest Smile*. It is a story where a villainy lot are trying to convert the world to a Bad End, where five legendary warriors – PreCure – fight to oppose them. The leader in charge of the Bad End Kingdom is introduced in the picture book, and his name is... *"Joker..."*

"My, my~~ It is a privilege to be remembered. Aoki Reika-san...no, *Cure Beauty.*"

"Eh...HUH!?" Without warning, Joker fires a countless number of playing cards from his hand to attack me. I promptly fall to the floor, dodging the assault.

Cure Beauty...that is one of the PreCure who appears in the picture book. He must be mistaking me for the character modelled after me, but she is the product of fantasy depicted in a picture book.

"What are you surprised about? *You are her!*"

I...am Cure Beauty!? That cannot be, how can...

Bewildered as I am, Joker mercilessly launches his playing cards at me. Unable to make heads or tails of this, I keep evading throughout the classroom. The impact of the cards destroy the desks and chairs, the floor and walls cracking in effect.

I rush over to the sliding door, and yet no matter how hard I try, it does not open.

Joker is drawing ever closer with a spine-chilling smile on his face. “I’m afraid there is no escape. This is my realm after all.”

Turning my back to the door, I confront the approaching jester. “Why are you doing this?”

“Why? I’m only acting on behalf of the hearts of your pretty little students, of course.”

“The hearts of the students?”

“Correct. I expect every last one of Class 2-1 to get very mad. Once they know your *true* nature.” The playing card that Joker has tossed grazes my body, and a sharp pain shoots through me. “On the surface, you feel for the students, the Aoki Reika-sensei who is admired by everyone. The perfect model of a teacher... But, I’m surprised you turned out to be such a *despicable* woman.”

“In what way am I despicable as you claim?”

The harlequin’s mouth grins and warps. “You should know...” An attack from a playing card finally hits my body directly, throwing me to the blackboard in the room. “You suspect your loving students. *In this very class, it should have the culprit who sent that pseudo-threatening letter without exception. I have no doubt the gentle smiles of the students are fake* – THAT is what you decided after all. *Elegant in heart and soul like a flower?* Don’t make me laugh. Who would’ve guessed that you have such a cruel heart.”

“You are wrong... I-I...have tried to listen to the voice in the pupils’ hearts...”

“If you really believe in the students, then you shouldn’t have suspected them now, should you? That is to say...you suspect them because you don’t believe in the students whatsoever. Your feelings and the like for them...that much is all you’ll ever have in the end.” With no words to even object, I can only continue to be attacked. “Moreover, the one who worried about you – the kind-hearted Irie-kun – is the first to be suspected of all people. As a teacher...no, as a human being, you are the lowest of low.”

Limp and hanging my head, Joker seizes me by the neck, slamming me against the blackboard. I am in agony, I cannot move.

Joker licks his lips, before whispering into my ear. “So, *kindly quit already*. Working as a teacher...just doesn’t suit you.”

~~~~~

I, then, awake.

Looking around the vicinity, it is the Staff Room. It seems I have been dreaming while taking a nap at my desk. Looking at the clock, after Irie-kun had left the Staff Room, only a few minutes have passed.

I use my handkerchief to wipe off the sweat that clings to my body. What a vivid and realistic nightmare... The Joker's eerie whisper, his breath...like it is still in my ear.

I question if this is due to my heart being exhausted. I question if the feeling of guilt for suspecting Irie-kun...is what showed me such a nightmare. Be that as it may, why I remembered the contents of *The Greatest Smile* now...is inexplicable.

I struggle to remember the face and name of the classmate who drew that book, a female who was but a middle-schooler at the time. Fond of picture books and fairytales, she is the type of girl who believes that happiness awaits if you always smile... But, I wonder why – why I am unable to recall her. It seems as if the heart has been concealed in darkness.

I give up trying to remember.

And thus, I thought to myself: *I should hurry and finish work for today. I need to hurry home; cool my head at my household.*

~~~~~

However, on the next day, I feel uneasy about Irie-kun as my heart becomes restless.

Even as I teach during class, I cannot get Irie-kun out from my head.

"Well then, please open to page 49 on your textbook. For today's lesson: Zhuangzi's *Dreaming of a Butterfly*. Zhuangzi is famously known as a thinker in the Warring States period of ancient China. In this tale..." On raising my face from the textbook, my vision meets with him. "...Irie-kun, would you give it a read?"

"Err, but Sensei. This *part*, we did it in class yesterday."

"...Ohh, my apologies. That was careless of me. Thank you..." Not just in class, either. During break time, including in the homeroom and club activities, my gaze would pursue Irie-kun. He is an honour student who speaks positively in class. He is also popular enough to be at the centre of gossip between pupils during break. The Class Representative who gathers everyone's opinion in the homeroom. He is an excellent head of his team who leads other members at the forefront in extracurricular activities... Over there, I can see only the image of Irie-kun as I have always known. So I find it hard to believe that he would ever send such a message.

I question if I am thinking too much of it as before. Yes, surely that must be the case. I should stop before suspecting any further...

When the activities in the Archery Club where I serve as an adviser are concluded, when the members return home, I look at the dōjō with everyone absent. Then, changing into a kyūdō uniform for the first time in a while, I stand in the dōjō.

I, too, once belonged to the Archery Club during my time in middle school. Archery is the best in order to unify the spirit. I am almost certain this will clear the haze in my heart.

On the contrary, the bow deviates from the target's centre. Though I try several times, I am unable to pierce the centre of the target. *This cannot be so...* I place more strength into the hand that grips the bow, my spirit concentrating. However, it does not go well.

"Seems you *are* troubled after all." Hearing a voice from behind, I turn around in surprise.

Irie-kun is standing there. His eloquent smile comes to mind as always.

"Irie-kun...you did not go home yet?" The enquiry goes unanswered, with Irie-kun staring at me.

"Your heart's in disarray. It's not very teacher-like."

"What is that about...?" I feign serenity still, but Irie-kun talks as if he has already seen through just about everything.

"What happened? Feel like talking it out with me?" Irie-kun's piercing eyes refuse to release me. "If you don't plan to talk, then I'll give it a shot in the dark: Did the school receive a letter, perhaps? *'Aoki Reika-sensei of Class 2-1, you cannot see into the students' hearts whatsoever. If you do not quit being a homeroom teacher, I will leave this school'*, is what it said..."

Why Irie-kun is aware of that...is something I am unable to understand. No, it is because I do *not* want to understand. I try to block it out, but he is indifferent and continues.

"What's more, on the survey I took, the content of that letter has the exact same wording as what was written on that piece of paper. So, Sensei, I'm guessing you suspect that *I'm* the culprit."

"What are you saying...? I would never do such a thing." Despite my endeavour to dismiss it, my voice is faintly trembling.

"Why are you trying to hide it? Sensei, if you're seriously proficient at calligraphy, then it should be easy to see who wrote it, just from looking at the student's handwriting. You figured that I must have written that, no question about it. Isn't that alone what's troubling you, Sensei?"

All of it is correct, but I strongly deny it. "No. You could never do such a thing..."

“Why would you say that?”

“*Why*, you ask...? You are Vice-President of the Student Council, the Class Representative, head of the Archery Club, even the students and teachers as well as everyone else respects you. Your Language Arts composition the other day was also wonderful. The story of *The Path* you had written, it was more splendid than anyone else’s in class, and even my heart was touched. That is why...”

“That is why...?”

I have not noticed the smile on Irie-kun’s face has vanished. Expressionless as he is, I await for his next words. “That is why...Irie-kun, I have faith in you.

“*Faith* in me?” All-of-a-sudden, Irie-kun breaks out and begins to speak. “How can you possibly say something like *that* so calmly, huh? What does Sensei know about me? Have you even seen all that’s in my heart? Being Vice-President of the Student Council, being Class Representative, being head of the Archery Club, having students and teachers and everyone respecting me, and I can write a wonderful composition...can you even say that I don’t have something like a single problem in there?”

For an instant, Irie-kun appearance, it overlaps with the figure of that ghastly Joker. I feel as if I am seeing a continuation of that nightmare, my sanity desperately striving to keep it together. “Irie-kun, stop...you are not that kind of pupil...”

—*so, please...*

When he speaks as if squeezing out his voice, Irie-kun glares at me with sharp eyes. “I knew you couldn’t see anything, Sensei. Nothing at all that’s in my heart...” Then, he quickly speaks his mind. “The one who sent that was *me*.” His words are truth, a fact evident from Irie-kun’s worn out expression which has usually never been shown before.

—*why, why do such a thing...*

“I wanted you to notice, Sensei. My crying heart...”

—*Irie-kun’s crying heart...?*

“I have always been asking for help, but even then, you just didn’t notice at all.”

—*always been asking for help...? What does he mean...?*

“Sensei, I’m disappointed in you.” Irie-kun’s voice is trembling, just as he leaves.

I can only stand there frozen on the spot. With Irie-kun’s words echoing in my heart many times over again and again like a curse.

~~~~~

When something one had once believed in crumbles away, people lose hope. Namely, to lose sight of the path.

Irie-kun's words – I thought long and hard about its significance. *'I have always been asking for help'*, he said, but I question what he means. When, in what way, did he bring it up? I have not the faintest idea. However, the exhaustion on Irie-kun's face...to be wholly despaired to make such an expression in that instance, I feel as if I recognise it from somewhere. I desperately trace my memories. He usually has a smile that never goes out, but only once has he...

Upon that moment, I remember.

A few days ago, I had tasked him to write a composition of *The Path* as homework for Language Arts, one in which he had given a presentation during class.

*If I'm not mistaken, it was during that time...*

Returning to the Staff Room, I pick up the composition into my hand. Then, I give the tale of *The Path* written by Irie-kun another read. On the page, it is a story in which one boy, worried about taking the exam, sought his own path.

In the setting where the young male protagonist is troubled, there is a certain monologue:

*'There are many paths in this world. Within every conceivable way, they can lead you down to any kind of location. However, before me lies not a path in sight. If there is no path, there is no hope. If there is no hope, there is no future. If there is no future, there is only despair. No matter how much I cry, no adult can reach my heart.'*

The protagonist...he finds hope in the end, for he will walk to open his own path.

But...

*Of course. This tale is not the work of Irie-kun, not in the least.*

~~~~~

My grandfather's health has suddenly changed, taking place on the next day.

Rounding up the lesson in the morning, I rush to the hospital where my grandfather has been admitted. Fortunately, my grandfather has already recovered somewhat, but according to the doctor, I have been informed that he is expected to reach a critical state either tonight or tomorrow.

Late on arrival, I make an enquiry outside the curtains of the sickroom. "Grandfather, it is me, Reika. May I come in?"

"Hrm...you may." Even now, his weak voice seems to fade.

When my grandfather in bed raises the upper half of his body ever-so-slightly, he faintly opens his eyes, to gaze upon the scenery outside from his window.

Outside is the beautiful landscape of Nanairogaoka, one he is able to overlook.

I sit down on a stool by the bed, and together with my grandfather, we bear witness to the sight beyond the window. My grandfather has provided support many times in life so far. Many of those memories are resurfacing.

“Reika.”

It is my grandfather’s voice, bringing me back to my senses.

Keeping his sight on the scenery outside, my grandfather speaks. “You seem to have lost your way.”

Despite such times, it appears my forefather can completely see through the likes of my heart. “...Yes.” An image of Irie-kun emerges in my mind. “I had intended to provide my attention to the pupils, so we may study together; walk together. And yet, somehow or another, it seems I had been self-centred.” Tightly gripping the top of my knees, my fists quiver. “What did I become a teacher for? I no longer know. I am unable to notice the cries of the pupils’ hearts, I am a failure of a teacher.”

At this very hour, I am not qualified to call myself a teacher anymore, and so I conclude that I have no choice but to resign my position of being one. Even now in life, one can lose their way, for the sight of the path can be lost many times over. But, only this time, I can think of no other alternative than to withdraw from the path of being a teacher. It is because my heart is weak, because I have completely lost the confidence in myself to face Irie-kun from tomorrow onward. However, when my grandfather speaks, they are words most unexpected.

“You have already found your way.”

My way... When my own face reflects in the windowpane, I stoically gaze upon it.

“Reika, where is your heart? If you can just let it reveal itself, the path will naturally open.” His words, for what would be an eternity in my heart, have been etched.

~~~~~

Around my 2<sup>nd</sup>-year in middle school, I had been troubled with the path of moving forward. It was an event that should be known as the greatest crossroad to ever confront teenagers.

One day, it was decided that I would be the chosen member to study abroad in England. I was selected to be the Japanese representative, so to speak, and I had been arranged to depart in one month.

I was greatly troubled. Studying abroad was something I had personally applied for when I was but a 1<sup>st</sup>-year pupil. I wanted to learn a variety of things overseas – that dream was coming true. However, at the time, I deeply wanted to be together with four precious friends by any means. If I were to study abroad, I would be separated from those companions of mine.

The relationship with friends who are more important than studying overseas – what in the world could it have been? What in the world could have happened between us? Even now, the memories are unclear. In spite of my attempts to recall those four, somehow the memories are utterly missing.

With those four girls, there are many fun memories. At any given time, we would laugh together, and together we would overcome the hardships as treasured companions.

When I first informed my grandfather about the matter of studying overseas, he once wrote a variety of characters for *The Path*, and he told me this: *“Paths may be indirect; paths may be winding; paths may be unplanned. The path comes in all kinds. Reika, what kind of path is being written in the pages of your life?”*

Troubled by my woes to the end, I abandoned the path of studying overseas, and chose the path to be with my friends. To my selfishness...my friends and teachers, even my family were greatly surprised. However, the one regret I bear is having not followed the honesty within my own heart.

The heart, as it is called, cannot be seen with the naked eye. To live with an honest heart...is unexpectedly difficult. Nevertheless, if you can gaze upon your truthful heart, if you can so much as decide to have courage, then mankind as a species can push ever forward.

*Think of important matters for yourself; decide for yourself.* I have learnt the importance of that.

~~~~~

On that late evening, my grandfather passed away in his sleep.

Giving his support to the family in a resolute manner at all times is the type of man my grandfather was. Whenever I was troubled, on occasions I would lose my way, he would teach me about the path...

Staring at the peaceful face of my grandfather, I make a vow to my heart: *I will carve open my path with my own hands. Whether it is an empty land that lays before me, whether it is a steep hill, if I can come to believe in myself and walk on, then surely the path can be opened.*

—where is your heart? If you can just let it reveal itself, the path will naturally open.

Thinking back upon my grandfather’s final request, I head back to school once more.

My journey as a teacher...has only just begun.

~~~~~

After school, the pupils of Class 2-1 are leaving the classroom one after another. The number of students, who are gossiping, reduce by one, reduce by one still, until finally there remains the final individual.

Exactly in the centre seat is Irie-kun sitting by his lonesome, his eyes fixed on me being the teacher. With only the two of us in the classroom, it is quite reminiscent of Joker's realm which emerged in that nightmare. *Still, I cannot lose heart.* That is what I tell myself.

"Need something? Sensei." I had told him in advance in order to remain after school.

"Irie-kun, as this is for your benefit, I thought it best to conduct an additional lesson."

Irie-kun lets out a sarcastic laugh. "Please quit with the jokes. You know my grades, don't you? I'm always keeping my school grades in the top ten, so what kind of additional lesson on earth am I supposed to receive that I can't do without?"

"Pay attention."

"The others in Archery Club are waiting on me, you know. And if I don't face the Student Council today too, then—"

"SIT DOWN! This is more important than club activities and Student Councils!" Never as a teacher have I let out a thunderous roar like that until now. Irie-kun, who is trying to stand up, speechlessly reseats himself in his chair.

This is also the first time I have ever scolded Irie-kun in such a deafening manner. I softly take in a deep breath before establishing a discussion.

"Irie-kun...I have come to realise what you had said. It is true I was quite unable to see into your heart. I thought of you as the perfect student, living day after day bereft of any troubles. The Vice-President of the Student Council, the Class Representative, the head of the Archery Club, even idolised by those among pupils and teachers. For an honour student such as yourself, I took it that you were devoid of troubles... But, it seems that is not the case."

Irie-kun silently pays attention.

I recite from memory of Irie-kun's composition titled *The Path*. "*There are many paths in this world. Within every conceivable way, they can lead you down to any kind of location. However, before me lies not a path in sight. If there is no path, there is no hope. If there is no hope, there is no future. If there is no future, there is only despair. No matter how much I cry, no adult can reach my heart.*"... Irie-kun, was this your own heart crying out?"

Irie-kun neither affirms nor denies it, only gazes at me.

“How you lost your way...is something I have pondered. The change in your disposition... And then, I remembered. About when I was once a middle school pupil. Why I forgot... I was also the same as you...”

“Sensei and I the same...?” Irie-kun enquires with a dubious look.

“As the Vice-President of the Student Council, as the Class Representative, I was relied upon by the pupils and even the teachers. But, even someone such as myself had troubles. More distressed than anyone else, my way lost, I sought a solution for the path...” I narrate to him about the memories of those days.

~~~~~

Diligent in my studies, I received excellent marks on my test, then one day, a friend of mine asked a question. *“Reika-chan, why do you study so much, anyway?”*

At the time, I was unable to give an immediate answer. Since nary a thought was ever given, about why I study.

It was not just studies. Until then, having never decided for myself, I realised that I was merely being enticed by others since the beginning. My older brother invited me to go jogging in the morning, my mother requested me to assist in preparing bentō boxes, everyone in class recommended me in becoming Vice-President of the Student Council, and also becoming the Class Representative...

Why do I study? What is it that I truly want to do? I was unable to see the path paved before me.

When I consulted with my grandfather about it, I received a certain piece of advice. *“Then, cast aside all that you already do. Stop, and allow yourself to see things as they are.”* His surprising words...left me puzzled.

Cast aside all that I already do? It was something unthinkable.

However, in accordance with the words of my grandfather, I chose to cast aside all that I did. Jogging in the morning, preparing bentō boxes, the Student Council, even as Class Representative...

Even a friend provided me support on it. *“Take some time to think things through, slowly figure out what it is you want from life.”*

That said, I came to realise something after careful consideration. The important thing is not just studies. There was so much more I wanted to see, to hear, to know. To find my real purpose in life, I would continue to learn all there was to offer from then on. That is the path I chose...

At the time, I realised on the matter that, it was thanks to my important companions. Whatever we did together as well, we would always brave the happy and sad times as friends. I am who I am now, because of them.

And then, as I came to be an adult, I found out what I really want to do in life — it is the profession known as a teacher. What I have learnt so far, I want to entrust it to the pupils who will shoulder the future. Together with myself and the pupils, I want us to learn much, much more.

That is my path.

~~~~~

To the attentive Irie-kun who is listening patiently, I continue. “Irie-kun...are you not the same as me in those days? The Student Council Vice-President, the Class Representative, the head of the Archery Club...not one were of my own choosing from the beginning, do you see? They began as mere recommendations by others, requests to be given... You seem to be managing it all with smiles and perfection. But, the reality is that it is suffering, is it not? None of those in question are really what you wanted to do. What you truly want out of life...is something unknown – the path you walk is beyond your sight. Is it because of that outcome that your heart is screaming out?”

Irie-kun, in his silence, has been patiently listening to my speech. However, when I think about that warped expression on him before long, he expresses a profound sigh.

“Sensei...I bet it must’ve been nice. To throw everything away in the middle of it all...”

“...What do you mean?”

“When it comes to me, throwing it all away while halfway just isn’t in the cards. My school grades, my Student Council duties, even the results of my club activities...the things I do and what I do, it’s all being compared to my superior older bro back when he was in middle school. I’m not a copy of my brother. I’m *me*! But...the eyes around won’t allow it. My parents, the teachers, my classmates, too...since I’m that superior Irie’s younger brother, it naturally meant anything and everything can be done perfectly because that’s what they all settled on. So I can’t betray their expectations. In front of everyone, I have to always play the honour student with a smile. Can you understand this pain now, Sensei? I’m just...so tired with the smiling.”

I think back upon Irie-kun’s smiling face up until now.

Whether it was in the homeroom, during break time, the Student Council or even in club activities, Irie-kun, who has an incessant smile when in touch with friends, has been harbouring such a great pain in his heart. I feel ashamed of myself for not realising it.

“I wanted Aoki-sensei to notice my crying heart. No, I thought for sure that you would definitely notice, so I tried to test you, Sensei. I regret having done something so foolish.” With a look as if he has been liberated from a lifetime of heavy burdens, Irie-kun weakly laughs.

“Thank you. You have finally revealed it to me – your true heart...” Gazing upon Irie-kun in earnest, I say to him, “For me, I wanted to abandon it, the path of being a teacher... Nearly crushed by anxiety, I blamed myself for not noticing the SOS of a pupil. Nevertheless, it is because of you that I realised something important.”

Displaying my weakness before a student for the first time, Irie-kun stares at me in astonishment.

“Irie-kun, right now, the path may be invisible to you. Abandoning it may be something you cannot do, for there might be nothing but unseen despair. Even then, the path of yours...will undoubtedly be found someday. You see, for the protagonist of *The Path* you had written, he diligently finds hope, thus opening the way because of it... You can do it, too. Think of important matters for yourself; decide for yourself.”

~~~~~

How much of my feelings have been passed down to him...has yet to be known to me.

Quite possibly, he might decide to continue playing the smiling Irie-kun from this point onward, and thus might continue to struggle. It may still take some time...for him to find one’s path.

However – having revealed our true selves, the distance between me and him has certainly shortened more than ever. Beyond the boundaries called teachers and pupils, for an instant, our hearts connected.

On that night, I once again have a dream.

The location is the classroom of Class 2-1. Desks and chairs are scattered as if struck by a storm, with signs of destruction on the floor and walls. I am being cornered by Joker, my back pressing against the blackboard.

I see. It is a continuation of that nightmare.

As if to ready the finishing blow, Joker makes a playing card appear in his hand. “You just don’t know when to give up, do you? Why won’t you quit being a teacher? Weren’t you branded a *failure*?”

To Joker’s relentless question, I provide an answer. “Yes. Perhaps I am a failure of a teacher. Because I did not notice Irie-kun’s crying heart.”

“Oh hoh, barking back, are you?”

“A teacher...I was trying to be the perfect teacher. I lent my ears to the voices of all the pupils, the lessons likewise perfect, to prove to be the ideal teacher who could demonstrate to everyone about the path... But then, I realised – there is no such thing as the perfect teacher. No, it is that I do not need to be perfect... Because even teachers can also lose their way. Sometimes, they may not so much as notice the cries of the pupils’ hearts. I was able to recognise such self-frailty. As a teacher, it seems to be that I must start anew once more.”

Talking on and on without pause as I am, Joker watches intently in stunned silence. I have no idea where that kind of willpower has been remaining – it is unbelievable.

“Before I was a teacher, I was but one individual. From this day forth together with my pupils, whether it be trouble, whether it be failure, I will walk with them side-by-side. That is *my path!*”

Upon uttering that, I could feel a power surging from the depths of my body. A divine blue light emits from my being, causing Joker to be blown away by the shockwave. “WHAT...!?” Joker is gazing at me in astonishment.

In that instant, I remember everything. During my time as a middle-schooler, I once fought as Cure Beauty. We spent our time together, where we would overcome the hardships as precious friends – Miyuki-san, Akane-san, Yayoi-san, and even Nao... I was greatly worried about whether I should study overseas or not, given that I was none other than a PreCure. Even back then, Joker would relentlessly attack my heart.

I know not why I have forgotten until now. However, the second I had broken through my doubts, the lost decade old memories have been completely restored.

When Joker clicks his tongue, he mutters in irritation. “Yet again...”

~~~~~

And then, I awake from my slumber.

I am located in the Staff Room. It is already night, and with most of the teachers having left to return home, the empty Staff Room has been rendered quiet. *I seem to have dozed off at my desk again.*

When I take a deep breath, long and hard do I recollect my memories of ten years past.

It was about how – following Miyuki-san, Akane-san, Yayoi-san and Nao – I became a PreCure as their fifth member. How the fairies Candy and Pop were despatched from Märchenland. About having opposed the generals of the Bad End Kingdom – Wolfrun, Akaōni and Majorīna – and the many Akanbe under their command. About how Pierrot was revived by Joker; how we saved this world from him. And about how the five of us together overcame the hardships no matter what, and how we opened the way to the future with a smile...

Although it was ten years ago, they were all real events. The picture book drawn by Miyuki-san, *The Greatest Smile*, is not an original work – it is actually none other than what we had experienced. A picture book with our five precious memories condensed within its pages. If that is the case, then why was I ever so convinced they were just fantastical events until now?

Ten years have passed since then...perhaps it is because I became an adult. But the memories of being a PreCure...I question if that is something I could just forget over time.

No. The days-to-days I spent with my friends, the numerous trials as a PreCure, my memories of Candy and Pop, those are all irreplaceable treasures to me. They cannot so easily disappear.

So then, why...

Just before I awoke from my dream, I recall the last words Joker had muttered: “*Yet again...*”

What did he mean by that? If it was simply a dream, then it should be just that. However, I feel there is something meaningful to that dream. The vividness of it felt as if Joker was truly attacking my heart.

Which reminds me...Miyuki-san and the others, I wonder what they are doing right now? If I can meet up with them, something might become clear to me.

In fact, I realise once again about something even more startling. After I graduated from middle school, for roughly a decade – Miyuki-san, including Akane-san and Yayoi-san, as well as Nao – I have no recollection of seeing them. We were quite close to a degree, so how it is that we lived without ever having met each other again is the question. To begin with, where and what those four girls are doing at present, even that is unknown to me.

I unfold the schedule book. Even if the memories fade, if I trace back to the arrangements of bygone days, then I thought there might be some clues.

And then, on a Sunday just last week, a certain plan has been jotted down: ‘*Go to see Nao*’.

—*Nao*? Upon seeing this, a memory that was also gone resurfaces.

Last Sunday, I definitely went to see Nao. Having rescued her from being almost hit by a truck, together we went to her household to hear about her current circumstance, a discussion about our memories of ten years past, and then being treated to dinner soon after...

But, it was only last week, I ponder how I could have forgotten.



As I go back through the pages of the diary, I try to pull on the thread of recollection. Then, the memories that I have forgotten one after the other began to return.

It was not just Nao. I have also been to see Miyuki-san and Akane-san as well as Yayoi-san.

We have all proceeded towards each of our dreams, struggling while tasting discouragement along the way: Miyuki-san is a bookstore assistant, Akane-san is in her Okonomiyaki shop, Yayoi-san is a manga artist, and Nao is a soccer coach. After that, everyone had completely forgotten about each other until we reunited. Even my childhood friend, Nao...

I am trembling. It is not just those of ten years ago, but the five of us are lacking memories concerning each other's existence. Even if we meet again, we would soon forget once more... I question how something so baffling can even happen.

It is as if someone has placed a curse on us in some way. About my precious friends, about being a PreCure, too – it is a curse that will make you forget just about everything when you become an adult...

It is not unconditionally impossible. After all, the three evil generals of the Bad End Kingdom – Wolfrun, Akaōni and Majorīna – were originally fairies of Märchenland, but their hearts had been painted black by Joker in spite of it, the memories of their time being fairies lost in order for them to do battle against us, the PreCure.

What if...the five of us now have also been living with our memories utterly rewritten? About my dear friends, about PreCure...if I am to assume everything should not exist, then what of the taste of each of our respective discouragements...?

Ten years ago, a certain incident took place. Using his powers, Joker trapped us in the '*Ball of Negligence*'. Within the ball itself, all the pain and hardships cease to exist, an extensive world where you can simply enjoy yourself perpetually, a fact in which we had lost sight of ourselves. However, the call of both Miyuki-san and Candy brought us back to our senses, freeing ourselves of neglect and transformed into PreCure, awakening to a new power and succeeded in a splendid escape. Joker, the one eyeing for the opportunity to our hearts, was a truly horrible adversary.

*Could it be...* For a moment, I realise there to be a possibility as I shudder in fear.

This world in which we live in now...is it truly the real world, I wonder? Have the five of us truly lived an entire decade since that day? Are we not trapped in a world similar to the '*Ball of Negligence*', having only imagined ourselves that we became adults, perhaps?

Incidentally, I recall the *Dreaming of a Butterfly* mentioned within the textbooks back in Language Arts. Once, Zhuangzi dreamt of being a butterfly that happily flittered about. However, he woke up, and he suddenly realised: Did he himself dream of becoming the butterfly, or perhaps, did the butterfly dream of becoming him just now? Whichever is the truth is left a mystery.

The me who is living as thus right now, is this the true me? How can one affirm that this is no dream, I wonder?

One time, I borrowed and read a specialised book concerning virtual reality that was in my older brother's bookshelf. According to it, this world in which we live in, it is a world that might very well be a virtual reality constructed by someone. The universe might possibly be a prison simulated by an elaborate program, and we might be prisoners living within it. At the very least, there is no evidence to the contrary even if it is not the case.

That would mean this entire world is a fabrication, but such a thing could hardly be it... However, this town of Nanairogaoka, the school, the students and teachers who gather there, this desk also, the class logbook, the sharp pen device, that stapler, the eraser too and so on...there is even the possibility that just about everything is an imitation for the sole purpose of deceiving my eyes.

I leave my seat to collect myself for a short while, staring upon my own visage reflected on the windowpane. On display is unmistakably the image of my 24-year-old self.

*Yes...I am Aoki Reika, age 24. The homeroom teacher of Class 2-1 in Nanairogaoka Middle School...*

Joker was bested around ten years ago in the first place, and Pierrot was defeated. Who could be capable of doing something so monstrous?

But then...I notice something. My image reflected on the windowpane. In the background, Joker is staring this way with an eerie smile on his face...

*Ohh, I must still be exhausted. Most likely that I have not fully awakened yet from the nightmare just now.* Or so I tell myself, rubbing my eyes. However, the appearance of Joker in the reflection does not cease to be.

I make the daring decision to turn my back around. And then, a voice of despair gives utterance. "No..." Standing in the corner of the Staff Room is Joker staring intensely in my direction. It is no dream. It is no illusion. Joker then bows his head in reverence.

"Weeell now, so nice to see you again. Cure Beauty."

The other teachers already are no longer in the Staff Room, leaving only me and Joker inside the area. "Joker, you should have been vanquished ten years ago..."

Paying me no mind, Joker swaggers about the Staff Room. “As expected from the so-called brains of PreCure, Cure Beauty. You’ve realised this world is nothing but fiction, I’m very impressed. Let’s throw in 99 points for you as a reward.”

The excess shock...it has left me feeling dizzy.

*Fiction...?* I am quick to not believe in it.

Joker breathes an exaggerated sigh. “Even though I’d been in contact from inside your dreams so that you wouldn’t notice, you’ve been nothing but trouble. While you might be an adult, I sooo want you to keep despairing all the same...”

I am taken aback by a realisation. “What of Miyuki-san and the other!?”

“Those four girls? They’ve already took off from this world.” All-of-a-sudden, immediately after Joker teleports behind my back, he whispers close to my ear. “Which just leaves *you*. 99 points is a good score so far, but I’m afraid I cannot give you the last remaining point. Because you won’t be escaping this world – your story has a *Bad End*.” Bringing out the playing cards in his hand, Joker utilises them to attack me.

I reflexively began to run, rushing out of the Staff Room – I flee down the deserted hallway. However, as the harlequin teleports in, he joyfully gives chase. Throwing out his playing cards, the lighting and glass windows are being shattered as a result. *This lighting, the windows, the floor included, and even the ceiling...is everything a fabrication?* I simply cannot bring myself to believe it.

During such an occasion, I would be ready to transform into a PreCure... But, in order for me to change into Cure Beauty, the Smile Pact is essential. I do not have it at present.

Standing in the way of my path, Joker sneers at me. “So sorry, but...in this world, you will not be able to transform into a PreCure. Picturing someone like you who became an adult and wants to transform? I would love to take a second to see that. Hah-hah-hah-hah...” The smile fades from Joker’s expression, his eyes shining ominously. “I’m afraid I can’t let you return to your fellow associates. The source of your power – it is the thoughts of each other, trying to overcome the hardships, that strength of heart... So it would be quite the nuisance if you five girls got together, you see.” Joker approaches me with an eye to kill his prey. “The Smile PreCure’s *Story of Despair*, here at Chapter 5 comes the Bad End.”

I am unable to comprehend what he means. “Chapter 5...?”

“Why, yes. In here is where you are the story’s main character after all.” Joker’s laughter echoes down the hallway.

I desperately think. There has to be a way to escape from this world...there has to be something. I have to escape, I have to reunite with Miyuki-san and the others. If the other four were able to do it, there should be no reason I cannot do it either.

At that moment, I hear a distinct voice. “...*Reika*~!...”

It is Candy’s voice. She is calling to me for help somewhere. “Candy!?” I strain to hear the voice. *The direction is...to the Library Room!*

I recall the existence of the Book Door. In the past, we were able to instantly travel anywhere through the Book Door as an intermediary – such is our secret base, for that is the Mysterious Library.

Joker is also aware of Candy’s voice, clicking his tongue. “Good *grief*...quite the noisy fairy, isn’t she? And we were just getting to the good part after all that trouble, too...”

At the slightest opportunity when Joker averts his gaze, I make a break for it. Running past the hallway, I make my way up the staircase, aiming for the Library Room.

I remember hearing a story from Miyuki-san. There was a time when she went to the Mysterious Library for the first time, meaning the bookshelf in the Library of this middle school is my chance.

“...*Reika*! *Help* ~*kuru*!...” Candy’s voice draws near.

The sliding door into the Library Room is close at hand. If I can just pass by the classroom of Class 2-1, it will be a step away...

In the next instant, a violent explosion occurs inside the library, myself blown away by the shockwave.

The library door has been destroyed, a dense smoke hanging in the room. Out from within the haze comes Joker with an air of composure.

When the smoke clears behind him, there is the Library Room that has been tragically destroyed. The bookshelves collapse, with countless number of books scattered on the floor. “Too bad. Did you think you could use the Book Door so easily?”

Before the triumphant Joker, with both my hands on the floor, I horrifically gaze upon the library.

“You cannot go back to your friends. Alone all by yourself, gladly welcome the Bad End as you despair in this world.” The jester declares the death penalty as he openly laughs cold-heartedly.

However, I raise my face, glaring at Joker. “No. I am not alone. I will not despair.”

“Oh hoh, where are you getting that bluff from...?”

“This world may be fiction. It may not be reality. But, I most certainly lived in this world. With irreplaceably beloved students...” Saying that, I look up to the plate of *Class 2-1*. The class where I serve as the homeroom teacher. That classroom...is located immediately to my left.

Realising my intention, Joker's expression is quick to change. However, I am one step ahead before he can move.

When I rise up, I kick the floor of the hallway, rushing into the room of Class 2-1. Passing by the front of the teacher's desk, I run up to the bookshelf installed by the window.

On the shelves, it is lined with books I would recommend to pupils. Not just that – there are a number of volumes compiling the compositions written by the pupils in Language Arts lessons up until now. From the bookshelf comes a mysterious light shining through, seemingly guiding me.

"...Reika~!..." From inside the bookshelf of the classroom, Candy's voice can be heard. There is no mistake – Candy is on the other side.

When I reach the front of the shelf, I then promptly slide the books and compilations. I perfectly remember by heart on how to open the door. Each time a book is moved, there is an unsealing lock in response.

Lastly, I slide the collected sentences of *The Path* composed by all the members of the class. With the composition of *The Path* as the key, I pave the way to escape from this world. It is the moment when the wheels of fate intertwine.

But Joker makes the arrival of his presence known by teleporting behind me. His nearby breath hanging so close to my ear... "You WON'T get away!" His hand tries to grab my shoulder in an instant — but the Book Door opens, sucking me into the bright illumination.

I am now descending through a realm of mysterious light. Candy is calling for help at the end of this radiance. Miyuki-san, Akane-san, Yayoi-san, and Nao – they are waiting for me. I have to join them as soon as possible...

I feel relieved in my chest of having ran away from Joker, and though my heart is dancing to the delight of being able to see everyone again, it harbours an indistinct anxiety. How did such state of affairs come to be...?

Then, I remember.

This inexplicable event that has befallen the five of us. Joker said...the Smile PreCure's *Story of Despair*. All of this, it was when we were in preparation for the middle school graduation ceremony that was to be soon at hand, it all began since that day...

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### *Final Chapter – The Greatest Smile*

Spring warms the heart up thanks to the nice and loving weather. I even have a fully satisfying smile on my face, making me feel *ultra-happy*. I want to share this happiness with all, with everyone I love.

What's more, the rain kept on pouring all the way until it lifted at dawn, with a vivid rainbow now spanning across the skies. The seven-coloured bridge stretching over the town, it seems almost like it's blessing our brilliant future. In this town of Nanairogaoka, a pretty rainbow often curves over us after a heavy shower because of the relation between the terrain and the climate. That's also the history of where Nanairogaoka gets its name from.

That reminds me – I heard of a legend that a treasure is said to be sleeping at the end of the rainbow, but...is it true? I wonder if there's anybody who is really looking for it? An eye for treasure hunting at the end of the rainbow...it sure sounds fairly exciting and fun, doesn't it?

But then, I feel anxious when I think about what's ahead. When I think about everyone, it makes my chest a little bit painful and sad. But if I always have a smile on my face, then I'm sure a happy future is bound to be waiting.

Bathing in the sunlight flooding in from the open window, I turn to Candy with a big smile on my whole face. "Candy! Take a look. The weather's really great outside! The rainbow is beautiful, the air is sweet, and it might be the start of an *ultra-happy* day...!"

Still sleepy, Candy looks up at me as she rubs her eyes. "Miyuki~, why get up early on a Sunday ~kuru?"

She would feel that way, of course. On days off with no school, there would be no rush for me to jump to my feet so fast and wake Candy up like this. "Because today is a special day. Come on, Candy, your happiness will run away if you keep sleeping forever."

"Kuru...? Special day is...what ~kuru?"

Asking as if to say she's listening carefully, I tell her, "We're going to meet up with the others at the Mysterious Library today, so we can plan out our graduation trip. Akane-chan, Yayoi-chan, Nao-chan, Reika-chan, all of us will be there. Mhmm~...where should we go, what should we do? I can't make up my mind♪" Just imagining this and that makes my heart dance with excitement.

We defeated the Emperor of Evil, Pierrot, saved the world as the PreCure, and after a whole year since then, we became 3<sup>rd</sup>-year students of Nanairogaoka Middle School. Spring is said to be the season of parting, and the time for us to say goodbye is coming. We're getting ready for the graduation ceremony next week. The five of us...are going to go and walk our separate ways towards our dreams.

“Haaah~, graduation, huh...”

When I murmur in a sigh, Candy jumps on the desk, and asks with a puzzled look on her face. “Grajuashion...what’s that ~kuru?”

I slump over my desk.

Since coming to Earth from Märchenland, Candy has always been together with me. Her true identity: the next Queen of Märchenland. Back when we were desperate in our fight against Pierrot, the power of the Miracle Jewel saved us, the PreCure. Naturally, even though she’s the next queen, Candy has so far been spending time with me like always.

“Uhm, well, it’s just...we’re not going to be students of Nanairogaoka Middle School for much longer. We’re going to go from middle-schoolers to becoming high school students, and then we’ll have to go our separate ways.”

“EHH!? Everyone is going to be torn apart ~kuru? Candy doesn’t like that ~kuru! Everyone should stay together ~kuru~~!”

“Geez, Candy. I didn’t mean that we’ll always be apart in that way.”

All five of us are going to be moving up to high school in Nanairogaoka, so it’s not like we’ll be separated in this town. But...Nao-chan is going to the high school with the toughest soccer around on a sports scholarship, and Reika-chan wants to enrol into the most advanced school in Nanairogaoka – those are the schools they are each settling on. As for me, Akane-chan and Yayoi-chan, the three of us are going to stick together in the same school.

“We won’t get to see each other every day like we always do. It might get a little lonely...”

That’s what I heard Yayoi-chan seemed to say the other day, and then Akane-chan suggested, “How’s ‘bout us five go on a graduation trip? We went ‘round the world with the Book Door last time, ‘member? There’s still a dozen places in the world we ain’t never been to yet. Let’s make ‘em our final memories o’ middle school!”

“That sounds great! Let’s go, let’s go! Let’s make tons of *ultra-happy* memories with everyone!”

And so, that’s why the five of us are going to meet up at the Mysterious Library today, where we’re all supposed to talk about destinations and plans for our graduation trip. Akane-chan and the others...I’m sure they will be thinking about the possible places where we should go, too.

I remember that moment, the instant when I got lost in the Mysterious Library for the first time. When I moved to Nanairogaoka, my first day at school, and when I got sucked into the bookshelves in the Library Room. It was also on that day...when I met Candy. Even the story of us as the PreCure, it all started ever since that day...

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The sinister omen...it came before we set off to the Mysterious Library. Now that I think back on it, I should've realised it a lot sooner.

After finishing up breakfast, I face the bookshelf in the room with Candy in my arms.

“Well then, to the Mysterious Library. *Rettsu gō...*” As I say these words, it’s time to slide the books on the shelf. But then a sudden gust of wind blows in from the window that’s been left open. The lace curtains flutter, the picture book placed on top of my desk flipping and flapping its pages. “That’s no good. The window, I forgot to close it...”

I hurry to shut the window. *Somehow, I feel like there is something weird in the breeze...* As I seem to think that, I close the book’s pages on the desk. It’s ‘*The Greatest Smile*’ – it depicts the events leading up to the encounter with Candy and then all the way to the PreCure saving this world. There is only one copy of this picture book in the whole wide world. Come to think of it, it wasn’t open earlier.

“Miyuki? What’s wrong ~kuru?” Her voice brings me back to my senses, and as I pick up *The Greatest Smile*, I hold it close to my heart.

For the first time in a while, we’ll get to read this picture book with everyone else again, and all the fun we’ll have with chatting and reminiscing will bloom like flowers. Those nostalgic days where we cried a lot, where we laughed a lot...we’ll all get to look back on them.

“Right, this time, to the Mysterious Library! *Rettsu GŌ!*” I open the Book Door in high spirits. Me and Candy are then sucked into the realm of light.

Hugging *The Greatest Smile* to my chest, for some reason it’s almost like the book’s alive with a *THUMP!* At least it felt like it was a beat. But...that sort of thing couldn’t happen, could it? *I’m sure it must’ve been my imagination.* That’s what I seem to think.

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The Mysterious Library, it isn’t anywhere on Earth. It’s in a realm different from the world we live in, a lovely place where fairytales throughout the world are gathered. Although it’s called a library, it isn’t an *ordinary* library. It’s a dense forest-like realm, with huge complex tree roots and stalks, and is full of mystical sunlight filtering in through the trees. In the middle of it, there is a tree stump that’s big enough to make you look up. The stump is arranged into a very cute house through the power of the Cure Décor, and inside is our hangout.



Before the five of us, who had just become the PreCure, set our hearts on the Mysterious Library to be our secret base, there were quite a few twists and turns. With a massive hole in the ground, it would be impossible for us to make it our hideout, so after a quick debate, we used the Book Door to travel to all sorts of proposed sites in search for a secret base.

But, we likewise settled on the conclusion that the Mysterious Library was the most appropriate for us. The thing we were really looking for...it wasn't in a place somewhere else, but directly close to us.

"Everyone! Thanks for waiting~!" When me and Candy finally make it, Akane-chan, Yayoi-chan, Nao-chan and Reika-chan are already gathered around the table. There on top of the table are cups of black tea, with steam rising out of them.

"Miyuki, y'slowpoke. What were ya doin'?" Akane-chan is puffing her cheeks.

"Sorry, sorry. Even though I tried my hardest to get up early, it took some time to get ready. ...Hm? Reika-chan, what are you writing?"

Reika-chan holds a writing brush with one mean look on her face, writing something on the pure white hanging scroll spread across the table. "It is done." On the scroll, written in her familiar beautiful handwriting is *'The Path to a Graduation Trip'*. Reika-chan hangs it on the wall in the room, stares at it with satisfaction, and turns around to us. "The graduation trip – it is the journey that summarises our three years of middle school life. Everyone, with each and every step of this journey, they will lead to dreams of future prospects. With that in mind, let us be prudent in selecting a destination."

"Does the trip have to be that great or somethin'? Do we at least get to go out n' play?" Akane-chan puts on a bored face with a comedic retort.

I pull myself together, and I look around to the others like a proper toastmaster. "Um, well then! With all the members assembled here, I would now like to begin the meeting to decide the destination for our graduation trip!"

Everyone applauds and clap their hands all at once. Candy's also clapping on top of the table.

I take out the picture books and novels that I've brought with me, spreading them across the table. All the stories here have only my favourite happy endings. "Girls, where do you think is a good one?"

"Uuhh, Miyuki-chan, what's all this?" Nao-chan asks, looking puzzled.

"It's reference material for choosing where to travel, of course. Pick number one: Home to the setting of *'Anne of Green Gables'* is Prince Edward Island in Canada. I've always wanted to go there at least once last time. And then, pick number two: The setting of *'Treasure Island'* is said to be on the Cayman Islands. We might even get to all go together on a *traaaysharr* hunt..."

“Treasure hunt!? That could be a bit thrilling!” Yayoi-chan is glimmering at the eyes, nodding somewhat in excitement.

“I know, right~~!”

But Akane-chan, Nao-chan, and Reika-chan’s reactions are more subtle. “Miiyuukiii~~, ain’t those hobbies o’ yers totally out in the open?”

“Then, where do you think is better, Akane-chan?”

“Fuumph, Miyuki, I’m glad y’asked!” Akane-chan pulls out a gourmet magazine, opening it to show us a page. “If we’re gonna head out on a graduation trip, a gourmet’ll be where it’s at. The theme’ll be: *‘The All-travel Nationwide Okonomiyaki Eatin’ Out Tour’!*”

“Oohh~! This looks delicious♪” It’s rare for Nao-chan, who often competes in a lot of things, to be seeing her climb on Akane-chan with an intense devouring eagerness for the gourmet magazine.

I stare at Akane-chan with disapproving eyes. “Akane-chan, *yer hobbies* are totally out in the open, too...”

“This ain’t ‘bout hobbies! It’s a great job for someone like me! Even if y’get wowed by okonomiyaki, the ingredients as well as HOW y’make ‘em’s a lil’ different in every parts o’ the country. Gettin’ to stuff down the whole land’s okonomiyaki n’ all that, it’d make for a convenient way to study their tastes.”

“But other than that, Akane-chan, don’t you want to go see Brian in England, at least?”

“Wh-What’re ya on ‘bout? B...Brian’s whatever, so it’s fine!” Akane-chan’s starting to blush. *Geez, all because it’s really easy to understand you.*

Yayoi-chan timidly holds up her hand. “Umm, if we’re going to go out of our way to travel throughout the whole country, then...I’d like to go to one of those hero show tours. There’s all sorts of local heroes in every corner of the country, you know. There’s still tons I haven’t seen yet with my own eyes...”

“There’s plenty of heroes on telly n’ manga, ain’t there!”

“Yeah, but...I *really* want to shake hands with a real hero.”

Not paying any mind to Yayoi-chan, Nao-chan makes a proposal. “Never mind that, I wanna watch a soccer game in Spain.”

This time, Reika-chan pitches in her idea. “Everyone, as a compromise, how about we settle on climbing Mt.Fuji?”

The others slip down their chairs all at once. “How’s climbin’ Mt.Fuji a compromise!? I don’t getcha!”

“The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. The path we choose in pursuit of our dreams after graduation...may seem almost harsh. However, in times of pain, in times of likely discouragement, the memories of having climbed to the summit of Mt.Fuji, Japan’s highest peak, should serve to make our confidence unshakeable against all.”

“It got rejected last time when we were out searching for a secret base, didn’t it? We’ll catch a cold, ya know.”, says Nao-chan with a stunned look.

“Point is, just ‘cus we got a Book Door doesn’t mean we’re all gonna bother climbin’ a tough mountain for no good reason.”

All of our opinions are falling apart, unable to agree on anything at all. Not willing to just watch, Candy shouts while hopping up and down on top of the table. “Everyone! Don’t just choose one ~kuru! Go to ALL of them ~kuru!”

“Oh, that’s right!”

I remember the time we used the Book Door to go on a trip around the world. We went about to all sorts of countries throughout the Earth at the time. We felt what it was like to be princesses in the Versailles Palace in France. We enjoyed a gourmet in Taiwan. And also, the Great Plains of Mongolia, the Great Wall of China, the Statue of Liberty in New York, the pyramids and Sphinx in Egypt, the Moai statues on Easter Island, the Leaning Tower of Pisa in Italy, the Big Ben in London, and the Amazon River in South America... Every one of those places left a lasting impression on us.

“Well, it’s just like Candy said – we’ll head out to Prince Edward Island where *Anne of Green Gables* is set, then we’ll go on the All-travel Nationwide Okonomiyaki Eating Out Tour, followed by the nationwide local hero show tour, and then watch a soccer match in Spain, not to mention we have to climb Mt.Fuji so...”

“That’s CHAOS! There’s no way we’re gonna get through ‘em all at once!”

*Hmm, that’s true...* Akane-chan’s comedic retort is at an all-time high right now. The discussion goes unsettled, and so we sink back into silence. “Hey, girls. There’s still some time before our graduation trip, so why don’t we all try thinking this over again?” When I suggested that, everyone smiles and giggles before nodding to me.

“Yeah, yer right. Let’s see if we can’t narrow down our choices a lil’ more.”

Nao-chan continues next, “A spot appropriate for all five of us...why don’t we oughta settle on just one place?”

We give it some thought. *A destination fit for the five of us, just where on earth could that be...*

Breaking the silence, I stand up. “Well then, I would like to put the aforementioned graduation trip on hold for the time being...and continuing on, I’d like to move onto the second division!”

Everyone stares at me with blank faces. “Whaddya mean, *second division*? Weren’t we just s’posed to decide on where to go on our trip today?”

“Ehehe, I thought so too, but since we’re going to graduate very soon, how about we take turns making announcements for today?”

“Announce...what?”

I answer Yayoi-chan’s question. “Our dreams for the future! What do you want to be when you grow up; what kind of work are you aiming for – let’s all five of us share them right here. Everyone’s delightful dreams...I don’t think we’ve ever properly heard about them...” We’ve always been walking together, but we’ve never took the time as a group to discuss about our dreams for the future. *I have to take this opportunity just before graduation, a chance to properly hear them out.* That’s what I’ve been thinking.

After which, Reika-chan cracks a cheerful smile as she gets up. “I believe that is a splendid proposition. Without further delay, would it be all right for me to go first?”

“Of course! Top batter – Reika-chan. The honour is yours!”

Reika-chan politely bows before giving her speech. “My dream for the future...is to become a middle school teacher. Human beings continue to learn over the course of a lifetime. Therefore I would endeavour to study alongside the students in pursuit of knowledge, improve upon the minds in extracurricular activities, and walk with each and every student to help discover the path they should take. It is a dream still very much a distant away, but that is my path I must tread.”

“Reika-chan as a teacher, huh~ It might be perfect for you! You’ll even get popular with the students!”

Soon after, Akane-chan stands up. “Kay, next up is ME. My dream’s, obviously, to take over the okonomiyaki shop *Akane*, n’ to make it the best joint in Japan. In other words, LOTSA BUSINESS! Be sure to stop by even when yer all grown-ups to chow down at *Akane*!”

“I’d go, I’d go!”, answers Yayoi-chan after raising her hand.

“Heeey~, so what about Brian~?” I smirk as when I move in to gently poke at Akane-chan’s side with my finger, she gets red in the face again.

“So *what* ‘bout Brian? He ain’t got nothin’ to do with this!”

Nao-chan is next to stand up. “I’ll be a soccer athlete! I’m gonna get into the Girls’ Soccer Club in high school no matter what it takes, of course. Everybody in my whole family’s lending me their support. To become a member of Nadeshiko Japan in the future is my dream!”

“If it’s you, Nao-chan, you’ll definitely become a skilled soccer athlete. I’ll even come and support you, too!”

Next is Yayoi-chan who is getting up rather sheepishly. “For me, I think I should be a manga artist after all. *Miracle Peace* was recognised as an honourable mention in a *Weekly Shōnen Smile* magazine, and the person who edited it really appreciates my manga. It would be nice to get it serialised someday.”

“Yayoi-chan, that’s amazing! I bet you’ll be a great sensei in the future!”

“I don’t know about that, but it hasn’t really been decided yet...” Even while saying so, Yayoi-chan is delightfully fidgeting around.

On the table, Candy makes her declaration. “Candy’s dream...is to be the beautiful Queen of Märchenland ~kuru!”

“I’ll be cheering for you, Candy. Cheering for your dream!”

Being able to hear everyone talk about their dreams makes me, from the bottom of my heart, feel *ultra-happy*. Everyone’s eyes are twinkling and shining when they discuss about their dreams, where all of us are making our way straight to the future.

“Hey hey, Miyuki, don’t we only got yerself to announce still?”

“Ah, you’re right.”

I stand up after being pestered by Akane-chan. Everyone with their smiling faces are turning to my direction. If I was asked when I was little about what my dream would be, I would almost surely want to become a character inside a picture book...is what I think my answer would be. I still have that certain desire even now, but the moment I seriously set my sights on the future, I have an unshakeable dream.

“My dream...is to become a fairy-tale writer for children, to write my own books so that many kids can get to read them. Going ‘*So much fun!*’ is the one thing I feel, and I want to live in conveying that to as many people as I can. If I can share my smile with everyone by doing this, then I think it would be a truly *ultra-happy* thing.” I then take out *The Greatest Smile* picture book that I brought from home.

As soon as I do that, everyone’s smiles sparkle in a flash. “Is that...the one Miyuki-chan drew back then...”

Noting Nao-chan's remark, I nod. "The events leading up to where we all became the PreCure, and the events as far as saving this world have been made into a book – it's *The Greatest Smile!*" I drew the pictures myself, with all the sentences written and finished up for the picture book. When I open the pages, there are sketches of the five of us as the PreCure and also Candy.

"Candy's in it, too ~kuru!"

Everyone gathers around the picture book, seeing the pages with intense eagerness. Just staring at it brings back a lot of memories, and naturally so does the brimming smiles. This very book is filled so much with everyone's happiness.

"Miyuki-san, given the rare opportunity, would you not be willing to read it for the first time in a while to us?" Reika-chan gives a suggestion.

"I'd like to hear it, too!"

"Miyuki-chan, read it, read it♪"

Nao-chan and even Yayoi-chan are urging me to do it, so I clear my throat with a cough. "Well then, I shall answer your requests..."

"Hey now, looks like someone's perfectly rarin' to read since the start, huh."

I place the picture book on top of the table for everyone to see, opening to the first page. "Somewhere out there, there was once a 2<sup>nd</sup>-year middle school student named Hoshizora Miyuki – an always optimistic girl who loved happy things and believed that happiness would surely be waiting so long as she had a perfect smile ready on her face..."

As I turn over the pages, continuing to read on, many events are being vividly called back in my mind: In order to save Candy who had been kidnapped to the Bad End Kingdom by Joker, everyone banded together as one to face him. There was us transforming into fairy forms in Märchenland, where we mingled with all the other fairies there. There was even the time we got sucked into the picture book world of *Cinderella*, where we ended up becoming the characters inside and struggled real hard, too... Candy, Akane-chan, Yayoi-chan, Nao-chan, Reika-chan...while everyone is still listening very closely, their expectations are riding fast on the numerous events of last year.

"...And so Miyuki and her friends had opened the curtains to a new story. The five lights guiding to the future – what kind of brilliant world could be waiting for them?" When I finish reading, everyone gives a round of applause with huge fulfilling smiles. I gaze at each and every one of their faces.

All of us are walking towards our dreams one step at a time. From now on, we won't know what sort of things will happen, especially in the future. However, with the memories we spent as the PreCure, if what is written in this picture book is etched into our hearts, then we won't ever lose to any challenge. When looking at everyone's hopeful expressions, a bottomless courage comes welling up. "Girls. The road to our dreams...it all starts here." As I say that, everyone gives a firm nod in silence.

*Yep, from here is where it should have all begun. A brand new story of us five girls heading towards our dreams...*

*Who would've guessed, though, that such a thing would happen...*

~~~~~

"...Huh?" Looking at the last page of *The Greatest Smile*, I tilt my head slightly to the side. On the blank page after the whole story is over, there is something like a dark smudge. It's dirty like spilt black paint. But, this sort of stain...has it always been here before? When and for how long? Speaking of which, right before coming to the Mysterious Library, the wind blowing in from the window fanned through the pages to turn and flap loudly, so did something fly by and get caught in the wind at the time or...?

All-of-a-sudden, something unusual happens. The teacups are starting to shake little-by-little with a clattering noise. *The Greatest Smile*, it's...it's vibrating on its own on the table's surface. "The book is...*alive*!?" Soon, the black stain stuck to the paper spreads throughout the whole page, expanding messily in a way to fill out the entire picture book itself. The front cover as well as the contents of the book have been painted black, and then *THUMP!* It's throbbing like it's truly alive.

"The heck's up with...THIS!?" Everyone couldn't help but just stare at it in complete shock.

Dyed in black, pulsing with heavy beats, the picture book soars from the top of the table. Although we try to catch it, the book flaps its pages like a crow as it quickly slips through our fingers, and immediately after does it violently smash itself through the door to escape the room. "Aahh! Waaait!" We rush out of the room in a hurry to chase after the book. Outside the room, there are tower bookshelves rising in every direction, and it's in the vast space of the Mysterious Library where many trees have overgrown. The blackened book of *The Greatest Smile*, having stopped in the centre, floats in the air.

We surround the picture book. "Everyone! Be careful ~kuru!"

Paying attention to Candy's warning, I then realise: *This isn't normal. Could this be the work of the Bad End Kingdom...? But, Joker is gone, Pierrot has been defeated, and Wolfrun, Akaōni and even Majorīna have been turned back into fairies of Märchenland. If that's the case, then who in the world could...?*

In the next instant, the book in the air gives off a prominently great big *THUMP!* And no sooner after it pulsates for some time, it grows to about the size of a person's height, which then shoots out malevolent black lightning bolts from within its pages.

"GIRLS! WATCH OUT!" Nao-chan yells at us, and we all hit the ground.

Usually wrapped in a tranquil atmosphere, the realm of the Mysterious Library is introduced to the rattles and vibration of being struck by the lightning strikes that's all coming through. Lifting my head, my breath is taken away.

The black lightning is firing blindly in all directions, draping the place with darkness. The entire set of the whole world's fairytales on the bookshelves, and even things like the stalks and roots of the gigantic trees, are all being painted black. It's like...it almost looks like one of those Bad End Realms that the generals of the Bad End Kingdom once made to appear using the '*Black Paint of Darkness*'. However, it's much more evil than that, a hunch that it's even more sinister...

"STOP IT! DON'T RUIN OUR MYSTERIOUS LIBRARY!" Right as I scream, the black lightning suddenly stops.

We timidly stand back up. In the air, having been painted black and become about as large as a tall person, *The Greatest Smile* floats still.

Looking around the area, the magical sunlight that would filter through the trees and pour from the heavens is being blocked by a heavy black fog. The books on the shelves are also covered with some sort of black soot as if they have been stained in darkness.

THE WHOLE WORLD'S FAIRYTALES HAVE BEEN STAINED IN DARKNESS! I rush over to one of the shelves, trying to make the books slide. But—

"The books won't move!?" The books on the shelves, shrouded in a black soot-like substance that is closely packed together, wouldn't budge an inch even as I'm trying to move them.

"Say what, that's ridiculous!" Akane-chan also rushes over, trying to move the books with the force of her entire might. However, she isn't able to shift even a millimetre.

"It's no good here, either!" Nao-chan is stunned as well as she tries a different stand. The books on the shelves...it seems as if everything has been fixed with glue.

Yayoi-chan mutters with a look of hopelessness. "If we can't use the Book Door, then..."

"That must mean...we are trapped in the Mysterious Library..." Hearing Reika-chan's words made us speechless. Candy looks all shook up and is seemingly about to burst into tears.

And now from somewhere unknown, *kukukukuku*...comes an ominous laughter that can be heard. "Who's there!?" We look around the place. However, we can't find the owner of the voice inside this thick black fog.

“Right here, riiiiight over here.” Hearing the voice with alarming clarity, we look up at the bloated picture book floating high above us. And then, we gasp.

From within its pages, something three-dimensional comes rising out. That familiar shape is–

“HIIIIIIIIII~~, DEAR PRECURES!”

“JOKER!?”

As if having opened a pop-up book, from within its pages comes Joker himself who leans out and is scornfully laughing. “Ohh my, what *JOY*. I get to see your faces twisted once more in such despair...” The book’s pages are now expanding to roughly the proportions of an actual human being, and because of that, Joker is already at what his original size would be as he looks down on us. “You did quite well to have defeated *Emperor Pierrot* of all people. To think you would crawl your way out from that bottomless despair – admirable, to be sure.”

“How!? You should have disappeared after being absorbed by Pierrot...” I remember the instant when Joker vanished. The second the Emperor of Evil awoke, Joker was swallowed up by muddled black paint, and then he became a part of Pierrot himself. The unsettlingly delightful voice of his in that moment...I can still vividly remember it. *He’s the same exact Joker...but how is he here...? WAIT, don’t tell me – does this mean the sketches I drew in the picture book became real?*

“If it means meeting you, my PreCure friends, then I’ll come back for as many times as it takes. You see, even if I lose my body, I’ll just become grudge itself.”

“Grudge...?”

Joker’s eyes twitch upwards, his mouth crooked. “Thanks to me becoming part of Emperor Pierrot, I inherited his almighty Bad Energy, and in turn became an *immortal being*. With this, I have been looking forward to the moment I would meet you all again.”

A resolute Reika-chan shoots an intense glare at Joker. “You lost your body, yet you have been roaming this world thus far to nourish your desire for revenge on us. And now, the picture book drawn by Miyuki-san is acting as a yorishiro, a spiritual vessel for your materialisation, which is how you are here addressing us. Am I correct so far?”

“As expected of you, Cure Beauty. Very quick to catch on, as always.”

I shudder in fear. “Then, at that time was actually...!” Before coming to the Mysterious Library, when a sudden gust of wind blew in through the window, I felt like there was something ominous. In that moment, Joker’s grudge had leapt into my room...and possessed *The Greatest Smile* picture book. “Give it back! That precious book is...it’s full of our memories...”

“It is BECAUSE it’s your precious book that I, you see, had to borrow it as my very own vessel.”

“...!?”

“If I am to get my revenge on you PreCure dearies, simply putting you down would just be *boring*. So I must paint the very things you treasure with darkness, since it’s clear you won’t give in to complete and utter despair.”

We lose the words to speak. Our most treasured things — in other words, *The Greatest Smile* picture book which is the fruit of all our memories, and then there’s our secret base, the Mysterious Library... “Girls!” When the five of us exchange glances, we take out our Smile Pacts. Peace has lasted nearly every day for the longest time, so it’s been a while since we have to transform into the PreCure.

The Greatest Smile, the Mysterious Library, too...we’ll show him that we can take them back with our own hands!

However — I instantly notice something strange. Our Smile Pacts...all five of them have been absolutely stained in the black soot-like substance and there’s zero response. It’s the same with the books on the shelves which have all become rigid.

“The heck, ‘sup with this muck!? Since when did it...” Akane-chan tries to wipe the dark soot off her Smile Pact. But...it’s as if it’s been turned into what looks like stone.

“Oh, I forgot to mention, but in this very room, you cannot transform into the PreCure. It’s filled with powerful Bad Energy inherited from Emperor Pierrot himself after all. And as you may have realised, using the Book Door to escape is very much impossible.”

Turning to face the triumphant Joker, Candy answers back. “Even if you do this, it’s useless ~kuru! Onī-chan will come help ~kuru!”

Joker leans himself out more than ever from the pages of the picture book, glaring at Candy. “That nuisance of a fairy-like thing you call *Pop*?”

Pop...he’s in Märchenland right now. Once he realises there’s something unusual happening in the Mysterious Library, he would immediately fly his way here to help us. However, Joker’s expression doesn’t change.

“I’m afraid he won’t be coming. As you can see, all the world’s fairytales have now been smeared in a Bad End. I suspect Märchenland’s also being locked away in darkness right about now.” Candy’s face is warped with despair. “Besides, the Book Door is unavailable...that is to say, it isn’t just about you lot not getting out from here. No matter how one does it, the fact is...trying to get in here from the outside world is simply NOT going to work.”

All of us are speechless. Joker must have been waiting this whole time for the chance to break into our hideout. I regret my own actions. It's all because I brought *The Greatest Smile* here...

When Joker clicks with the snap of his fingers, a flash of dark lightning promptly zaps Candy. "KURUUU!!" She screams as her entire being goes numb. Candy's body soon floats up to the sky high above Joker's head, and immediately after, the lightning changes itself into black chains and restrains Candy in the air.

"CANDY...!" Trying to rescue a squirming Candy who has been fastened above, we rush to her side.

"Now now, ladies – kindly keep your distance." When Joker snaps his fingers one more time, an extra set of black lightning shoots out again, and the shackle-bound Candy lets out a loud shriek.

"KUURUUUUUU!"

There is nothing we can do, petrified at the sight.

"COWARD! Let Candy go free, face us fair and square!" Nao-chan faces Joker and bravely yells at him.

"YEAH! If yer gonna take a swin' at Candy, then why don'tcha take a swin' at us!"

"Is that so? Well then, *without further ado...*" With the sound of another click from Joker's fingers, bolts of black lightning surge down on us.

"KYAAAAH!" An intense pain assaults our bodies from head to toe, causing us to collapse to the ground. Only one person – Akane-chan – at least manages to avoid it as soon as she breaks into a run and, with the strength of volleyball-trained legs, she leaps for Candy high in the sky. But...it's only just before the hand touches Candy and no more — Akane-chan's been struck directly by black lightning.

"UWAAAAAAHHH!" Crying out in agony, she drops to the floor.

"Akane-chan!" Yayoi-chan rushes over, helping her up.

This time, Nao-chan swiftly runs like the wind, and when circling around Joker's back, she tries to take the opportunity to rescue Candy. But then...Joker doesn't overlook the attempt, either. Nao-chan is attacked by a dark bolt, ending with her tumbling down. "KUHH...gh!" Reika-chan tries to help her up.

During which, Joker breathes a sigh of disappointment in an exaggerated manner. "How *obnoxious* – just from seeing that little team spirit of yours helping each other. Your thoughts for one another, believing your strength combined to be a thing of real beauty – what truly *foolish* children."

“WE’RE NOT FOOLISH...!” The minute I cry out, I try to stand back up. “We’ve always been helping each other, with the five of us overcoming all sorts of painful things, too!”

Yayoi-chan stands up as well, mustering her courage. “That’s right. If we want to rescue Candy, we’ll stand tall again and again! Even though we can’t so much as transform into the PreCure...”

Inside the picture book, Joker flutters and floats around above us as he chuckles. “Oh, *that’s right* – it completely slipped my mind. Candy-kun is no ordinary fairy. She is the next Queen of Märchenland. I can see why everyone here feels soooo worked up over her.”

“It ain’t ‘cus she’s the queen!”

Following up after Akane-chan, Reika-chan shouts at him. “It is because she is our beloved friend!”

I fix my gaze on Joker and cry out, “GIVE US BACK OUR CANDY!”

Joker...right when we think he’s going to let out a *kukukukuku*...kind of sneer, he unexpectedly has a serious expression and looks down on us. “In that case...please indulge in a game with me, everyone.”

“Game...?” We keep silent at his surprising proposal that came out of nowhere.

“If every single one of you here can *CLEAR* it, I will set Candy-kun free.”

I remember the last day of our summer break a year ago. It was about the mysterious dice created by Majorīna called the ‘*Sucked-Into-Playing-Gaaaames*’, which had pulled us to a world of games. In that amusement park-like realm, there was whack-a-mole and bowling and the like, and they said that if we couldn’t clear all the games, then we wouldn’t get back to our original world. We worked together against the three generals for a showdown in the games, and somehow we were able to escape that land of fun. Now, Joker is about to set up a new game for us. What in the world could he be planning?

Joker leans out even further than ever from the picture book. On the page behind him are letters rising to the surface.

Our breaths are taken away. These are the table of contents:

Chapter 1 – Hoshizora Miyuki

Chapter 2 – Hino Akane

Chapter 3 – Kise Yayoi

Chapter 4 – Midorikawa Nao

Chapter 5 – Aoki Reika

Unable to understand Joker's intention, we can do nothing but just stare at the title of each chapter that has our own names on them. Joker continues, "The story of *The Greatest Smile* — let's have everyone personally experience the SEQUEL. I happened to listen in not too long ago. About your future dreams. And my oh my~~, they were truly a masterpiece. I just couldn't help myself...*I couldn't help but LAUGH at them.*"

"What's so funny 'bout our dreams!?" Akane-chan instantly shouts at him.

"You have no right to ridicule our dreams." Reika-chan declares with words charged with tranquil fury.

"Because, my dears, your ideas are naïve. Do you REALLY believe your dreams will come true? Even after this, will that happy future as you've imagined it still be waiting for you always, perhaps...?" Without giving me a chance to answer, Joker abruptly brings his face up-close to the very tip of my nose. "*You're far too naïve!* Tell me, do you still see yourself wanting to become a character inside a picture book? I'm certain a miracle will happen in the story – your dreams come true. However, you should know that life won't always have a real happy ending!"

We are at a loss for words. *Life won't always have a real happy ending.* That was Joker's remark...and I'm starting to think somewhere in my heart that he might actually be right.

But...I try not to be mentally weighed down, so I take one step forward. "That's not true at all. If we believe in the future and keep pushing onward, then happiness will surely be waiting for us!"

To my insistence, Joker broadly grins back. "Weeeell then, why not try it for yourself? Simply go to the future..."

"The future...?"

"Allow me to explain the rules of the game: everyone will travel from here to the world of the future, where you shall be the protagonists of the '*Story of Despair*'. Evolved by my dark powers, the '*Book Door of Despair*' will ferry you across without fail."

We look around at the surrounding blackened bookshelves. The cases are giving off hefty *THUMPS!* upon each pulse as if responding to Joker's words. *The other side of this dark Book Door...leads to our future...?*

"Your destination shall beeee...*nine years* from now into the future. Age 24. You shall grow up to be full-fledged adults, and you may become shaken by the rough seas of society. You may even be worried about life or start losing your way. Buuut...none of you will give up on your dreams, right? You can overcome just about any kind of despair, *right?*" Joker provocatively looks down on us.

"Of course. I will become a children's stories author."

“I’ll make sure my okonomiyaki shop thrives.”

“I’ll be a manga artist.”

“A soccer athlete for me.”

“And I a teacher.”

The five of us then exchange glances, nodding to one another. “WE WILL NEVER GIVE UP ON OUR DREAMS!” That declaration isn’t so much as a response to Joker, but rather an oath to our personal future selves.

Joker couldn’t resist but say to us with an entertained face. “Those *words*...how I’ve so waited for those words. Well then, everyone, do kindly enjoy all FIVE chapters of the *Story of Despair*. Once each and every last one of you have overcome your grief and sorrows, the Book Door will open, and you may all return here once more.”

Akane-chan laughs it off with a sneer. “If the five of us work together, it’ll be one easy victory!”

Joker, in an exaggerated manner, continues. “OOPS! I forgot to mention one *very important* detail. In the *Story of Despair*, I shall have the privilege of seeing the memories you lot have spent together be *erased*.”

I ask in shock, “Our memories *erased*...? What do you mean!?”

“Within the *Story of Despair*, it means you will forget that you were all best buddies, and you will forget you were ever a PreCure. These memories of hope...well, they would only be a hindrance to the *Story of Despair*, you see. Everyone here must paddle alone in the stormy seas of life, and only then can you overcome the trial – the trial as very ordinary women...”

We realise the significance, losing our words to speak.

The reason why Joker called our future the *Story of Despair* finally becomes clear. Our memories of meeting Candy, the memories of us five becoming the PreCure and overcoming all sorts of hardships along the way...it’s a treasure that can’t be easily replaced by anything. To think that those same memories are going to be snatched away...

My voice trembles. “Why would you do such a cruel thing...”

“It’s like I said – I must paint the very things you treasure and hold dear with *darkness*, all for the sake of making YOU give in to complete and utter despair. Ohh how I SO want to see it. Everyone here all grown up, living out your *miserable* little lives as adults. The very pleasure of turning your happy conclusions into bad endings, there is simply no greater joy to be had. Kukukukuku...AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAH!” Joker keeps laughing in a shrill voice. It’s as if he’s already won against us, as if the entire world has been seemingly painted with a Bad End.

“I don’t want that. I don’t wanna lose my memories o’ bein’ with ya girls...”

When Akane-chan mutters, Yayoi-chan starts to do it, too. “Me, neither...I can’t bear to forget everyone entirely like that, I just can’t.”

“It’d be like none of it ever happened...I don’t want that, either!”

“If we lose our memories, then what in the world are we to believe in...”

Tears are swelling in everyone’s eyes in our reluctance to part.

Still tightly bound in black chains above us, Candy gets teary-eyed as well and calls to us. “Candy hates it ~kuru... Everyone completely forgetting Candy, CANDY ABSOLUTELY HATES IT ~KURU!”

Joker soon bombastically shakes his head. “Oh dearie me, wherever did all that spirit go just now? Weren’t your eyes sparkling so much from all that discussion about dreams together? Don’t dawdle now, you have a snappy decision to make, so kindly do so, won’t you? The *Story of Despair* grows impatient for you.”

Despair... It’s true, there won’t always be real happiness in our future. We might hit a wall, or we might even get all discouraged along the way. However...

I wipe away the tears, look hard at everyone’s faces, and say, “Girls, let’s go.” Akane-chan, Yayoi-chan, Nao-chan, and Reika-chan...they all stare back at me. “Even if our memories disappear, our bonds won’t change. Even if we’re apart, at least we won’t forget our smiles. Because the five of us are *Smile PreCure* after all.”

The coming hope and determination overflows from everyone’s expression.

“It’s just as Miyuki says.”

“I...I’ll never give up.”

“Even if it means us being apart...”

“Our hearts are connected.”

We look up to Candy who is restrained high above. “Candy, we’ll come save you no matter what, so please believe and wait for us.”

Candy tries to hold back the tears while looking back down at us, eventually ending with her crying as she forces a smiling face. *Whenever we say bye-bye, we do it with a smile* – that was the promise...the promise that Candy had made to her brother, Pop.

On one of the black-stained bookshelves, it gives off an ominous *THUMP!* as soon as it starts beating – the *Story of Despair* is calling to us. Once the five of us gather our resolve and turn our backs on Candy, we confront the bookshelf.

Joker whispers something desirable in the background. “Now, the five lights guiding to the future – what kind of wondrous despair could be waiting for you? I’m trembling with excitement to find out...”

In an instant, the books on the shelf begin to slide on their own. Even though the books wouldn’t move an inch at all before, now they seem to be moving around almost as if they are alive. And each time, *CLICK, CLICK*, goes the echoing sound of rusty locks like they are being opened.

The five of us join hands. Feeling the warmth in each other’s palms, we stand ready.

In the next instant, a surge of darkness is set free from the bookshelf before our eyes, swallowing us whole.

We’ve been sucked into the blackness of the case itself. It’s usually always full of mystical light inside the Book Door. But now, all I can see is darkness – a jet-black darkness stretching on for as far as the eye can see. Is THIS the colour of the future that’s waiting for us? Can we even shine on this darkness with our light of hope?

No, I can’t lose heart. Candy, I’ll definitely come back...

Immediately as I think that, our connected hands are suddenly pulled apart by the torrent, causing the five of us to become scattered. Akane-chan, Yayoi-chan, Nao-chan, Reika-chan — everyone’s very presence is getting further and further away. The memories of us five having spent together are fading, like it’s all melting into the darkness. Candy’s existence, about PreCure, the fun memories too, even the painful memories, everything...

I try to call to them by their names. But...the name themselves wouldn’t come out. Even though they are my precious friends, even though there should be countless memories, I can’t even remember their faces at all.

And now, I no longer know why I got myself in this darkness, I don’t know why at all. It’s frustrating...it’s scary...

...Huh? Who...am I again...? What was I doing so far?

Just now...I feel like I had a long, long dream. In the dream, I met a fairy, banded together as one with my friends, and we saved the world from despair. It was an awfully realistic and dramatic dream. It was almost like I became the main character in the original picture book that I created and drew, ‘*The Greatest Smile*’...

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Like letters written in invisible ink appearing on a blank page, I’ve regained all the memories that I had lost. My life, nine years ago, had stopped on that day as a 3rd-year middle-schooler. And the five of us, we’d been living inside the *Story of Despair* brought to life by none other than Joker himself.

I still couldn't believe it. The town of Nanairogaoka, the bookstore, Mom and Dad, even Yoshimi-chan who I met at the bookstore...just about everything in my nine years of life was all fictional. However, now more than ever, I think about wanting to see the others as soon as possible on that day.

Having entered the Book Door from the bookshelf, I fall through the realm of light. Beyond this radiance, there is the Mysterious Library itself. Candy is waiting for help.

It's not just me. I'm almost certain the others must have overcome despair as well. Even though we haven't reunited yet, I'm convinced. Even if we're separated, I can have faith in them from the bottom of my heart.

Everyone's faces and names are coming back to me – Akane-chan, Yayoi-chan, Nao-chan, Reika-chan. On that day, we talked about our dreams for the future together at the Mysterious Library, the promise we made, the touch of our connected hands...I can clearly remember them now.

I HAVE to go back to that day. For the sake of saving Candy... To meet everyone again with a smile... *Wait for me! Candy, everyone! I'm coming now!*

It's only then in that moment. Somewhere far in the distance within the light, I can hear a faint voice. "...Miyukiiiiii!..." It's a dearly missed person whom I've always been with. Nine years ahead in the future, around the street corner of the Nanairogaoka shopping district is when I unexpectedly crashed into, and reunited with, an old friend... There's no doubt about it. That voice is...

"Akane-chan!"

I find Akane-chan herself falling together with me in the tunnel of light. She expresses a smile like the sun, waving her hand. "Miyuki, y'managed to break out, too!"

"It's all thanks to running into you in the other world, Akane-chan! Thank you!" Not just Akane-chan. Yayoi-chan, Nao-chan, and also Reika-chan. Everyone with smiling faces is falling down the illuminous domain. As if five girls are sort of skydiving all at once, we descend while trying to gather together in one place.

Everyone's appearance aren't that of 3rd-year middle school students, but have remained as 24-year-old adults. *Having become grown-ups, we as the Smile PreCure are all together now!* Is what I would say, but we're falling right now.

"Miyuki-chaaaan~! On the other side, I got to be a *manga artist!*" Yayoi-chan raises her voice in great delight as she makes a double-peace to me.

"I couldn't make it into Nadeshiko Japan over there, but I did get to be the coach to a soccer team!"

“In that world, I assumed the role of a teacher in Nanairogaoka Middle School! The homeroom teacher of Class 2-1, to be exact!” Nao-chan and Reika-chan are also waving their hands while getting closer and closer.

As I wipe away my tears of joy, I swim forward in the light in order to seek for their smiles.

Everyone overcame their hardships in the end. Our dreams came true in the end. And the memories that were lost, we got everything back in the end.

Now I know, I’m sure we can move forward to the future. There may be painful things or even tragic things, but the five of us will never forget each other. Always and forever, we’ll go forward all together. “Girls! Let’s go save Candy!” As the five of us fall down the tunnel of light, with a nod, we try to stretch out our hands to form a circle. Just a little more and our fingers can finally be within reach – where we can be one.

However, a touch of anxiety is born in me. This is the inside of the Book Door. It’s strange, then, that it’s taking so much time to come out on the other end of the entrance. Moreover, why is it that we’re still in our adult forms, I wonder...?

At that moment, a ferocious howl trembles throughout the realm of light. From the bottom comes a shockwave that strikes us, causing our group to become scattered again just before our hands could come into contact. Not knowing what happened, we regain our posture, checking on each other’s safety.

“The heck’s THAT!?” Akane-chan raises her voice hysterically, turning our gaze to look down at what she is pointing at far below.

Something enormously dark is rising beneath us. Spreading its gigantic wings, it spews out the heaviest of sinister black fogs as it looms closer, and that monster is...

It’s The Greatest Smile picture book possessed by Joker! The size of it has become so huge that it’s covering the entire realm, taking flight through the light with jagged wings that once used to be the sheets of the picture book. Leaping out from the pages without warning is Joker’s face, now reduced to a blackened ugly monster, his eyes blazing and bright. Each time he lets out a howl, the realm of light becomes enveloped in black fog, ruled by the darkness.

Joker gives off an evil roar against us. “HAHAHAHA! What a pity! Having absorbed an abundance of Bad Energy from you all as adults, I was blessed with the privilege of evolution! And so shall its name be dubbed *BAD JOKER!* This here is the *Book Door of Despair* created by yours truly! And now, in the Smile PreCure’s *Story of Despair*, here is your FINAL CHAPTER! Here is where your lives reach a BAD END!”

Bad Joker flaps the wings of the picture book, attacking us even as we fall. In the passage that has been completely shrouded with darkness, our group is then blown away by the shockwave, causing us to scatter. “EVERYONE...!” Engulfed by Joker’s gargantuan body and the spreading darkness, I gradually lose sight of Akane-chan, Yayoi-chan, Nao-chan, and Reika-chan’s presence.

Even though we were finally able to reunite... Even though we were supposed to escape a little later...

Almost immediately, however, I fall to a rugged ground, hitting my butt hard. For a second, I experience the illusion that I’d fallen out the Book Door and arrived back to the Mysterious Library, but I instantly come to realise that it isn’t the case. It’s cold and dark, like a vast empty earth created by Bad Joker.

I look around the area, but there is infinite darkness no matter which way I face – there is only nothingness itself. There is no exit leading to the Mysterious Library. “AKANE-CHAAANN! YAYOI-CHAAANN! NAO-CHAAAN! REIKA-CHAAANN!” To the darkness, I aimlessly keep calling out everyone’s names. But...there is no answer. Although it seems my heart is giving in to hopelessness, I desperately cheer myself on. “This is foul play! The five of us cleared it like you said, we all overcame our despair, and we even got the Book Door open!”

Just then, a sudden gust of wind swoops down from high above. The moment Bad Joker lands in the room right before my eyes, bolts of black lightning launch from his mouth. I get struck by a direct hit, its power flinging me across the rocky earth. An intense pain courses throughout my whole body, my vision getting blurry.

“I’m afraid there is no end to despair! No matter how much you believe in the future and move on, once you grow up trying to make your dreams come true, sooner or later you *will FORGET!* Your precious friends and dreams and even your memories, *EVERY LAST BIT OF THEM...!*”

As I groan while trying to lift my head, I can see the massive Bad Joker shake the very ground with each passing step as he comes closer. Pressing my hands against the blackened earth, I push myself back up. “You’re wrong! My friends, my memories, my whole life with the others is a treasure! I’ll never forget them! It’s because our time as the PreCure, the dreams we talked about, the memories we spent together, every-ONE and every-THING is *eternal* to me!”

“SHUT. UUUUUUUUP!” Joker bares his vicious fangs at me. And from his mouth comes another charge of black lightning that’s about to fire.

In my hazy consciousness, I make a wish. —*Please. A miracle...please let one happen.*

It’s in that last second when the dark lightning tries to attack me.

“It’s just as Miyuki says!”

I lift my face up to that voice. “—EVERYONE!” Even after getting scattered, as soon as Akane-chan, Yayoi-chan, Nao-chan, and Reika-chan descend upon having cut through the dark skies, they land one after the other. We stand lined up in the darkness of the land, confronting the titanic Bad Joker.

“No matter what, we’re not going to give up on our dreams!”

“We all got our memories back; got over our despair!”

“It is not just despair that resides in the future. There is *hope!*”

Gazing at the image of everyone standing in the dark, I regain my smile. “Girls...!” Momentarily, a dazzling light overflows from our bodies. Struck by the shockwave of light, Bad Joker in his giant form gets forcefully pushed back, gouging across the dark earth.

This sensation, there was a time when I tasted it before. Yes, when I transformed into a PreCure for the first time...

But wait, that probably means...!

In the next instant, our Smile Pacts appear in front of us. They aren’t turned to stone by Joker’s power. The ones that are casting a strikingly beautiful light are the genuine Smile Pacts.

Bad Joker blinks his eyes at the five lights, raising his startled voice in fright. “IMPOSSIBLE!? This is the *INSIDE* of my *Book Door of Despair*... Don’t even think you lot as adults can just transform into the PreCure to begin with, it’s not like you ca—!”

“We CAN!” I cry out with confidence. “It’s true this may be a world that you created. But above all, it doesn’t change the fact that it’s a story about us five girls! The main characters are *us!* Whether it’s a happy ending, or a bad ending, *ALL OF IT* depends on us! Because no matter how hopeless things get, we’ll *never* lose sight of hope! Because miracles truly happen in stories! If we can change the *Story of Despair* to the *Story of Hope* with our power, then *any miracle can happen!*” I take up my Smile Pact, my eyes fixed on the others. “Girls, let’s transform! Become the PreCure, turn *despair* into *HOPE!*”

Akane-chan, Yayoi-chan, Nao-chan, and even Reika-chan – their looks of astonishment says it all.

“Miyuki...y’serious!? I mean, we’re *24 years old* ‘ere!”

“‘*Adult PreCures*’!? So cool, SO COOL!”

Yayoi-chan is in high spirits. Nao-chan still has a dumbstruck face. “Hold on, you mean to say we can really transform like this!?”

“Of course! After all, it’s the *FINAL* chapter!”

“Won’t we run into any problems...?”

“At any rate, let us put it into practice rather than contemplate further!” Urged by Reika-chan, we nod to one another.

One time, there was a powerful potion invented by Majorīna called ‘*Become-a-Kiiid*’, which had caused us five to become very young children. At the time, we were able to transform into the PreCure even though we were just kids – but it wasn’t only that. With the power of Majorīna’s invention in the shape of rings called ‘*Swaaaapping-Places*’, me and Candy’s minds changed places, but even then, I was able to transform into ‘*Cure Candy*’ while still being in her form. Even when our bodies became super tiny with the power called the ‘*Tuuuurning-Tiny*’ mallet, everyone who were micro-sized were still able to transform. *That means...we should be able to do it even now as adults...no, we CAN do it! Probably!*

The cover on the Smile Pacts open. We set the transformation Cure Décors in them. ‘*Ready!*’ says a heavenly voice, and at the same time we cry out: “PreCure! *SMILE CHARGE!*” In the next second, ‘*GO!*’ says the voice, together with the light pouring out of the Smile Pacts. Mine is a pink light, Akane-chan’s is an orange light, Yayoi-chan has a yellow light, Nao-chan’s is a green light, and Reika-chan has a blue light. The radiance gathers and crystallises around our right hand, causing puffs to emerge.

“*Go! Go! Let’s Go! HAPPY!*”

“*Go! Go! Let’s Go! SUNNY!*”

“*Go! Go! Let’s Go! PEACE!*”

“*Go! Go! Let’s Go! MARCH!*”

“*Go! Go! Let’s Go! BEAUTY!*”

Riding on the melody, we apply the light onto our bodies with the puffs. Our adult bodies with long arms and legs are then enveloped in bright glimmer, transforming ourselves into the PreCure.

Finally, when we dust both cheeks with our puffs, the five of us line up with smiling faces. “Twinkling and shining, the light of the future! *Cure Happy!*”

“The brilliant sun, hot-blooded power! *Cure Sunny!*”

“Sparkling and glittering, Rock-Paper-Scissors♪ *Cure Peace!*”

“Intense courage, a straight-up bout! *Cure March!*”

“Snow, falling and gathering, a noble heart! *Cure Beauty!*”

With our group shining brilliantly, we exclaim all at once: “The five lights guiding to the future! *Shining bright! SMILE PRECURE!*”

A miracle has happened! We each check on the other's appearance, cheering out of joy. "WE DID IT! All five of us...REALLY became *Adult PreCures!*"

Our bodies stayed as 24-year-olds, but for Happy, Sunny, Peace, March, Beauty — we as the Smile PreCure have successfully transformed! What's more, the tiara on our heads have become utterly gorgeous, our outfits arranged all mature-like and evolved, and it's somehow making me very thrilled and *ultra-happy!* It will be called—

"Okay, I've decided! These will be...*Eternal Forms!*"

"Hey, what's that 'bout decidin' all on yer own for!?"

"*Eternal* – it is a word that signifies 'never-ending'. I consider it to be lovely." Next to the sharply questioning Sunny, Beauty agrees with a smile.

"But wait, that means I'm *eternal-happy!*"

"My right leg...it should've been injured, but when I transformed, it's totally healed..." March confirms her condition as she bounces up and down.

"Peace, even as a grown-up, yer still playin' out Rock-Paper-Scissors as usual, are ya?"

"Of course I am! Today's glittering game is Scissors, Scissors I say! So did everybody win?"

"Who're y'talkin' to!?"

"Everyone, we cannot afford to be excited!" Bringing our attention to Beauty, we look up to the sky. Bad Joker is letting out a hideous loud roar, now looking down on us as flashes of black lightning release from his enormous body.

"How amusing. *Adult PreCures* born out of everyone's power...do feel free to show me WHAT IT AMOUNTS TO!" Joker furiously flaps his wings to swoop in for an attack.

"Girls! LET'S GO!" We kick off the rocky black earth and break into a sprint.

Bad Joker tosses bolts of dark lightning to strike us. The air rips apart and quakes in turn; the vast land starting to crack all over. I leap over to avoid the flashes of lightning, quickly soaring above Bad Joker himself.

Charging up my fighting spirit, I form a heart shape with my hands, right before shooting out pink-coloured light waves. "*Eternal! Happy Shower SHINING!*" Bad Joker is bathed in the eruption of light, propelling the giant to drop all the way down to the ground. The unexpected power leaves me startled at my own self. "Ohhh!? It's like my attack strength has gone up, too! This is the power of Eternal Form!"

Sunny sports the energy of mighty flames throughout her entire body, ending in her throwing a scorching fireball. "*Eternal! Sunny Fire BURNING!*"

Peace, using her right hand that's pointed straight toward the heavens, gathers thunder light into a peace sign before immediately releasing it from both hands. *"Eternal! Peace Thunder HURRICANE!"*

Upon March condensing wind energy into the shape of a soccer ball, she spins her body around and around into a tornado as she unleashes an intense shot. *"Eternal! March Shoot IMPACT!"*

And Beauty converts her energy of ice into an arrow, combining her ice swords together into a bow with which she uses to fire the arrow. *"Eternal! Beauty Blizzard ARROW!"*

Our attacks land one after another. While Bad Joker gives off an agonising roar, he skyrockets high up back into the dark skies.

"It's for real! Our powers, they've gotten *super strong!*" Sunny gets excited over her own strength. However, in the sky comes a thunderous resounding boom, causing us to look up.

Bad Joker is now scattering his black lightning at random. The speeding bolts become tentacles that close in on us soon after, coiling around and restraining our bodies. Although we stubbornly try our best to resist, we get swung about by the feelers, throwing us violently against the uneven grounds.

With a horrid deafening noise, blackened clumps of the earth fly into pieces before long. The ground itself collapses, forming a crater-like hole.

At the bottom of the pit, we get up out of the chunks of gravel and brush ourselves off. Strangely enough, there isn't that much damage on us. Despite the fact it's been a long time since we had to transform, our strengths are being demonstrated now more than ever.

"It's like I thought – we've powered up just as much as we have become adults!" Quickly grabbing the darkened tentacles still coiled around our bodies, we swing Bad Joker around in circles back into the opposite direction, hurling him away with all our might. Bad Joker tumbles further and further up the sky. "Girls!" As soon as we nod to one another, we take flight to the sky. Steadily rising through the darkness that seems to last forever, we eventually discover him floating about. Bad Joker, as if in a last-ditch struggle, counters back with a discharge of dark lightning bolts.

However, the five of us don't hesitate. While avoiding the flashes of lightning, we become five streaks of brilliance, drawing ourselves closer to Bad Joker himself in the sky.

An image of Candy crosses my mind. The very same Candy who is being held captive in the Mysterious Library. Our loveable Candy...

“We’ll *definitely* make it back to the Mysterious Library! We’ll *definitely* save Candy no matter what!” With that desire in our hearts, we gaze upon the colossal Bad Joker.

In a moment’s notice, seemingly in response to our thoughts, shining into the dark domain is a beam of glimmering hope. Beyond the light, the faraway silhouette of Candy restrained in the Mysterious Library can be clearly seen. And radiating off her chest is the Miracle Jewel, awakening as the queen with her appearance transforming once more to be Royale Candy.

Candy’s voice distinctly reaches our ears. “*Make everyone’s powers as one ~kuru!*”

Candy...!

We tightly grasp the Princess Candles summoned to our hands, ready to unleash our final technique. “*PreCure! Eternal Rainbow BUUURST!*” Our group and Candy’s light become one, resulting in a rainbow-coloured lustre that cuts through the darkness. Its sparkling brilliance, its majestic power...with a force surpassing the older technique, it approaches Joker. Although agitated by the oncoming intensity, he sets up a shield with black lightning in defence against it. Our bright light clashes with Bad Joker’s darkness. “HAAAAAAAAAAHHH!!” Putting all our might and feelings into the attack, we push back the darkness. The power of us five and Candy’s combined, it proceeds to overwhelm Bad Joker’s shield. Just then, in that moment—

“Everyone, that’s...!” Beauty cries out. We all gaze in wonderment.

All-of-a-sudden, in the spreading darkness behind Bad Joker, an unusual dimension opens up. On the other side of that gaping wide hole, pages of a picture book are being projected. And what’s being depicted in the book is...pictures of our appearances as adults!

Me working at the Nanairogaoka Station-Front Bookstore; me getting told that the store is going out of business.

Akane-chan saying her goodbyes to Brian; her struggling really hard to make okonomiyaki.

Yayoi-chan being extremely busy with her manga serial; her requesting to end the series.

Nao-chan injuring her right leg; wavering between her job as a coach and her family.

Reika-chan being unable to see into a student’s heart; losing sight of her path as a teacher.

All five girls are suffering discouragement with their dreams, reaching their limits, and even facing distress. There are no smiles at all, not with everyone losing their way.

Turning his large face towards us in order to provoke the group, Bad Joker boldly laughs. “By no means can the *Book Door of Despair* ever end! There is simply no hope for the future!”

We put more strength into our hands gripping the Princess Candles, our thoughts becoming as one. “We’ll open up the future! If it’s against the fake future that you made, then we’ll show you that we can overcome it without a shred of doubt!”

Bad Joker’s mouth grins creepily and distorts. “Then I must say that there has been a GRAVE misunderstanding, my dears. I’m afraid the *Story of Despair* was never a fiction created by me.”

“Eh...!?”

“All five chapters of the *Story of Despair* are, and forever have been, the future illustrated and created by none other than YOUR hearts! Those bad endings were born precisely because of the despair that lies within you!”

Overwhelmed by shock, we lose our words to speak. *That future world...was born from our hearts...!?*

“Maybe you will be met with discouragement at some point. Maybe you will lose your dreams. Your friends and even your memories...maybe someday you’ll forget them all. What sense could any of that possibly hold for such a future? If you’re just going to be met with failure anyway, then wouldn’t it be rather nice to *not* have those dreams to begin with?” Bad Joker’s shield fashioned out of black lightning, it’s starting to dye our light in darkness. We desperately try to endure, but the coming blackness seems to swallow us whole in the end. Bad Joker is convinced of his victory, giving out a loud roar in supremacy.

However, I stare at the darkness without giving in. “It’s true that holding onto our dreams is painful. We might get discouraged and be bound for failure, and I’m sure there will be all sorts of difficult things. But...but I want to believe in dreams! After all, we were all able to overcome the *Story of Despair* because of them!”

Akane-chan too, Yayoi-chan also, Nao-chan included, and even Reika-chan – everyone fights against the darkness with faces of determination.

“Yeah! Though I got all heartbroken, I realised the okonomiyaki’s secret ingredient!”

“My series is over completely, but I wanted to keep drawing manga always!”

“I couldn’t get to be a soccer athlete, but I’d the courage to be a coach away from my family!”

“I almost lost sight of the path as a teacher, however, I set my heart on walking together with the pupils henceforth!”

“We came to think that way because...Joker, it’s all thanks to your help.”

“...WHAT!?” Bad Joker opens his eyes wide to my remark, becoming speechless.

“Living out our lives ‘nine years later’, we were able to realise something very important. If we do our best, someday there will surely be happiness. There is hope beyond despair. The *Story of Despair* and the *Story of Hope*...their stories are one and the same.”

“There is *no* hope! There is only DESPAIR!”

Bad Joker strenuously lets loose the dark lightning from his whole self in opposition. Yet, all five of us persist in pushing forward, exclaiming all at once: “WE WON’T GIVE UP ON THE FUTURE!”

“NUAAAAAAHHH!? STAY AWAAAAAYYY!” Instantly, with our five lights and Royale Candy’s light combined, the divine ray of purity collides into Joker. He screams at the top of his voice in agony, his appearance steadily shrinking.

Opening my arms out with a huge smile on my face, I tightly embrace him close to my heart. “Joker...thank you.” The darkness from Bad Joker completely fades soon after, restoring *The Greatest Smile* picture book back to the way it used to be.

The darkness that ruled the realm disperses, and the light comes back. The *Book Door of Despair*, it returns to being the original Book Door. The *Story of Despair* becomes the *Story of Hope*; the Bad End becomes a Happy End.

And finally, the five of us look up to the curious dimension beyond the wide gaping hole that is soon to be empty. That’s where the pictures of our grown-up ‘future’ selves are being projected. The images, engulfed by the light, vanish.

Goodbye – our ‘future’ selves. Thank you...for showing us a wonderful dream. Let’s meet again someday. In the not-too-distant future...

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In the next instant, falling through the realm of light, I tumble out from exiting the bookshelf.

The feel of this ground, the smell of the books, the light streaming down...it’s the Mysterious Library! *I’m finally back!*

When I raise my eyes, the thick black fog that used to fill the area has cleared away, with the magical sunlight now filtering through the trees and pouring from the heavens. The black soot that covered the bookshelves have also disappeared, with the cases holding the entire world’s fairytales towering far and as high as ever. The secret library, once locked away in the dark by Joker, has been fully restored!

“Owww...” The next thing I hear is a voice, and it’s Akane-chan who has collapsed in a posture like she’d fallen forward across the ground, holding up her forehead. It isn’t only Akane-chan here. Yayoi-chan, Nao-chan, and Reika-chan too, they are all sitting down in front of the bookshelves, taking a good look around the area.

“Girls...!” The five of us rush together, embracing each other in a hug. We all call out to each other’s names, checking on each other’s safety. “Akane-chan! Yayoi-chan! Nao-chan! Reika-chan! I’m so...I’m so glad you’re all safe!” Our transformation have been undone, and our appearances have returned to us being our original 3<sup>rd</sup>-year middle-schooler selves.

Candy then comes in flying with an explosion of joy. “MIYUKI~! EVERYONE~!”

“CANDY!” Candy dives into my chest. The excessive force causes me to fall on my back. “You okay!? You’re not hurt!?”

“Candy’s okay! Everyone being safe makes Candy happy ~kuru!”

I pull Candy off my chest. “Hey, about us...exactly how long have we been in that other world that we’d gone to?” Having lived in a world as a 24-year-old for so very long, my sense of time has gone numb. It feels like years have passed since then, but it also feels like a moment.

Akane-chan brushes up to me, leaning herself forward. “Ya don’t think it’s been nine years in this world too, do ya?”

*Could it!? If that’s true, then...*

“I do not believe that is so.”, says Reika-chan, heading inside the stump house. We even follow her in.

On top of the table in the room, there are cups of black tea that everyone was drinking before we set off.

Reika-chan touches a cup to examine it...and smiles sweetly. “The tea is still warm. It seems after we embarked on our journey, it has only been about ten minutes or so.” To her cool analysis, we deeply sigh with a feeling of relief.

In just over ten minutes, not only did we become 24-year-old adults, but we also happened to transform as we were into the PreCure – it was like the event was similar to a dream. However, it wasn’t a dream because I was able to drive off Joker.

“Candy did her best, too ~kuru! Candy kept cheering for Miyuki and everyone ~kuru!”

I remember. Before opening the Book Door in the other world, I heard Candy’s voice. Her voice is what sparked my escape. “I heard it perfectly – Candy’s voice.” I give Candy a tight hug once more.

“Same ‘ere. Candy, y’sure gave it yer all!”

“Me, too! Candy, thank you for calling out to me, using my name.”

“I might not have made it back if I didn’t hear Candy’s voice.”

“Even I was by a hair’s breadth.”

At that moment, a voice can be heard somewhere. *“Everyone~!”*

*This voice...!* We rush out from the stump house. No sooner do the bookshelves give off a divine brilliant light, something leaps out of the Book Door.

“EVERYONE! ARE YOU ALL SAFE ~DE GOZARU!?”

“Pop!”

Pop, who just turned up from Märchenland, is out of breath upon landing.

“ONĪ-CHAAAAN~! CANDY WANTED TO SEE YOU ~KURU!”

Candy rushes over, embracing Pop. The excessive force causes Pop to go *“Nuooh!”* as he falls over on the ground. Still, noticing his younger sister makes him express a sigh of relief. “Candy, were you safe ~de gozaru? The Book Door was closed shut by a dark power; I was getting worried ~de gozaru.”

“Is everyone in Märchenland okay!?” When I ask, Pop nods with a smiles.

“Safe ~de gozaru. Wolrun, Oninin, and Majorin, everybody is fine ~de gozaru. Putting that aside, what in the world happened ~de gozaru?”

*Weeell, where should I start explaining, I wonder? Everyone was talking together about where to go for our graduation trip, talked about our dreams, and then... It’s then when a sudden realisation hits me. “That reminds me, where’s my picture book...?”*

*The Greatest Smile picture book used by Joker, where did it go...?*

When looking around, I see the book has fallen on the ground in the centre of the Mysterious Library. I run over to it, picking up the book.

It’s been turned back to normal without any changes. Joker has disappeared from the last page, and our names for all five chapters are also gone.

I wonder if Joker has completely disappeared for good? Or maybe...he’s burning with revenge against us, still prowling around somewhere. In any case, we were able to overcome the challenge given to us by Joker, and even though it may have been a fictional world, we were able to turn despair into hope.

I stare at the blank page of the picture book. “I’m going to write it here. Our future...”

Akane-chan, Yayoi-chan, Nao-chan, Reika-chan, Candy — everyone gazes at the blank page, nodding to one another. And then, we all break out our greatest smiles.

Not bothering Pop who is standing up still trying to digest the situation, I say, “I got it! Girls! An idea, I came up with a good one!”

“Whatcha mean, a good one?” Akane-chan asks, and I answer with a perfect smile.

“The destination for our graduation trip! It’s somewhere we can all go to, an *ultra-happy* place where everyone can get to smile!”

~~~~~

To our future selves.

~~~~~

It’s strange to remember things, isn’t it?

There are memories that you will immediately forget, and then there are memories that won’t ever fade no matter how many years go by. For me, it would be the memories I spent with everyone, a lifelong treasure that can’t be easily replaced by anything.

Now then, there’s one last thing – I have to leave behind a note for those special memories.

It’s for our group’s graduation trip—

On that day, following our discussion at the Mysterious Library, we couldn’t settle on where to go on our trip in the end... So I came up with an *ultra-happy* place instead.

~~~~~

It’s the day of the Nanairogaoka School’s graduation ceremony. Awarded with graduation certificates, our juniors and teachers see us off, and together, we leave the school gates. Akane-chan, Yayoi-chan, Nao-chan, and Reika-chan...everyone looks onward to the future, their smiles sparkling and shining brightly.

When I look up at the sky, there is a rainbow bridge in the air after all that rain has stopped. It’s a rainbow so big and beautiful than I have ever seen before.

Unable to contain my excitement, I turn around to the others, and propose, “Girls! Let’s go on our graduation trip right now! To our *ultra-happy* place!”

Everyone becomes dumbfounded and stares at me. “Right *now*!? Miyuki, what’re ya on ‘bout?” When Akane-chan points that out...

“I have to go back home to get ready...”

“I can’t up and leave my family behind, either...”, says Yayoi-chan and Nao-chan who are also both at a loss.

“BUT, we have to go right away or we’re not going to make it in time! We go *now!*”

When I urge them, Reika-chan asks, “Miyuki-san, why not kindly tell us? The whereabouts of this trip is...?”

Pointing at the vibrant arc, I answer with a sweetly smile. “The end of the rainbow!” Looking up at the colourful bridge, everyone become stunned. Even Candy pops out of my bag, gazing at the rainbow with a very curious expression. “Haven’t you girls ever heard of it? There is a tale about a treasure sleeping at the end of the rainbow. So why don’t we go together right now? To the end of the rainbow. And seek out our treasure all by ourselves.”

Everyone suddenly starts smiling like cherry blossoms in full bloom.

“That’s typical Miyuki-thinking for ya.”

“I consider it to be a fantastic destination.”

“Then we’d better hurry up n’ go before the rainbow disappears.”

“Let’s go, let’s go♪”

“Candy wants to go, too ~kuru!”

Everyone gives their approval unanimously. “OKAY, if we’re all decided, Smile PreCure, it’s time for our special graduation trip! For the treasure hunt at the end of the rainbow, *rettsu GŌ!*” We set out walking towards the end of the rainbow.

The multi-coloured arc seems to span across the town of Nanairogaoka, with the end connecting to the top of the hills on the outskirts of town. If we take the bus or use bicycles, we might makes it there in a short time. But instead, we choose to go step-by-step using our own legs.

During the time when we were discussing about where to go for our graduation trip at the Mysterious Library, we were only thinking about using the Book Door. It’s true that, if we use the Book Door – then from bookshelf to bookshelf – we can go anywhere in the whole wide world.

However, I came to realise something. Even if we don’t use the Book Door, we can still go on a journey to make memories that can last a lifetime. Alongside beloved friends, in search of a treasure we have yet to see, and heading for the destination with our own legs. *There is just no other graduation trip as dreamy as this!* This step-by-step process is etching memories right now, making me feel like it’s connecting to the future...

While walking silently, we arrive to the outskirts of town. Eventually, the traffic disappears, and even all the houses become sparse. The rainbow that looked so big and pretty not too long ago, now it seems likely to melt and fade away.

The end of the rainbow is almost in our sights. If we climb up that hill, we'll find our destination there, the place where the treasure sleeps.

A little more...just a little more...

We start running before we know it. Nobody speaks, we just run.

After struggling to reach the foot of the green hill, we quietly go up the slope aiming for the summit. The refreshing spring breeze – the scent of flowers – gently pushes our backs.

As I climb the hill in silence, a lot of memories come and go in my mind. About running through a whole year as a PreCure, and the huge number of irreplaceable events during it...

And now at last, after scaling to the summit of the hill, we finally arrive through all that struggling to the end of the rainbow.

But there is nothing atop the hill, just a space where the green grass is swaying in the gentle breeze. While everyone is catching their breath after giving it their all, nobody can say a word.

I look up at the sky, letting out a sigh in the end. The rainbow has already disappeared.

The five of us and Candy...for a brief moment, we are stunned as we stare into the heavens, but eventually one of us starts to laugh out of the blue. Soon, we all join in laughing out loud together, flopping ourselves down to lie on the hill's surface. The faint aroma of the grass carpet, it softly takes us in.

A treasure sleeping at the end of the rainbow. It's from that sort of tale that made me come up with a treasure hunt, but nobody ever said we had to dig it out. By now, it seems everyone doesn't care about the silly treasure anymore. Nevertheless, I managed to reach as far as the end of the rainbow together with my dearly beloved friends. Simply having that miraculous experience is enough.

The area around us turns completely dark in time, and the sky becomes full of glimmering stars. "Akane-chan, Yayoi-chan, Nao-chan, Reika-chan, Candy..."

As soon as I call out their names, everyone looks back at me in confusion.

I smile and laugh. "It's nothing...I just wanted to call to you all."

The night sky in which we see, it's filled to the brim with twinkling and shining stars. The night breeze is comforting, it feels almost like I'm having a dream.

I've always wanted to do this here. If I could, I would want to do it forever...

“Gotta makes ya think...I wonder if we’ll totally forget someday?” Akane-chan sighs as she says that. “‘Bout us bein’ friends, bein’ the PreCure...are we all gonna forget once we become adults?”

Everyone goes silent. All we can hear...is the sound of the wind, the sound of swaying grass, and finally the sound of our faint sighs. It’s a very long, long silence.

“We won’t forget.” I proclaim to her. “We’ll never forget...*never*.”

That’s when we set our hearts on something. In the spot at the end of the rainbow, we’ll bury a treasure. Our very own special treasure—

That treasure is...yep, this book. The book in which we have personally experienced all six chapters of the *Story of Hope*.

Taking our irreplaceable memories, we seal them in a time capsule and entrust them to the future.

It’s so that one day, when we’re all grown-ups and have lost hope, we can climb this hill at any time, and open its very pages... It’s so that when we dig up the treasure, we can get back our very own smiles again...

*



To our future selves who have become adults.

Hey there, how are you doing right now? Did your dreams come true? Is your work fun? You didn't forget to smile every day, did you?

If you have opened this capsule and are reading this, then it's most likely your heart is being troubled. You may have lost sight of your dream, and you may be facing discouragement. You may have even lost your smile, and you may have been stricken with sorrow.

But think back, remember that time.

At the end of the day, you girls became the PreCure and saved the world.

So be brave.

You were all able to change the Story of Despair into the Story of Hope after all.

And, don't ever forget.

You all have irreplaceable friends who are there for you.

Whenever you want to cry, think back to when you used to go to the end of the rainbow with everyone, and remember that day.

Somewhere in the twinkling and shining starry sky, you will surely find happiness.

Hoshizora Miyuki



=Glossary & Cultural References=**-Honorifics-**

(Note: Full names here are presented in the common Asian order – surname before given name.)

-san: An honorific roughly equivalent to Mr., Mrs., or Ms. Basically, this is used with everyone but close family, friends and little children.

-chan: An honorific used to show affection.

Otō-san: Used to refer to one's father.

Tō-chan: Same as above. Child's language.

Okā-san: Used to refer to one's mother.

Obā-chan: Used to refer to one's grandmother.

Oba-san: Aunt. Similar to the previous example.

Onē-chan: Used to affectionately refer to an older girl, or older sister.

-ane: A humble honorific used to refer to an older girl, or older sister.

-kun: Used to address young males. Can also be used to address females which is slightly more formal and respectful, as well as very close friends and family members.

Sensei: An honorific used towards one with a level of mastery in an art form or skill. It is generally translated as 'teacher', but the honorific sensei can also be used as a title to refer to or address other professionals or persons of authority.

Senpai: An honorific used toward one's senior – for example, an upperclassman. Hierarchy in terms of age and experience is taken very seriously in Japanese etiquette.

-Food-

Hotpot or *nabe*: A method of cooking adapted from China. A pot of simmering soup stock is kept in the center of the table; various ingredients on plates are placed around it, and individual servings are placed in the stock to cook, then transferred to the individual's plate. Usually served with a soy-based dipping sauce.

Okonomiyaki: The name means 'grilled as you like it'. It is a savoury type of Japanese pancake containing a variety of ingredients. The dish is mainly associated with the Kansai or Hiroshima areas of Japan. Toppings and batters vary according to region. However, Kansai-style okonomiyaki is typically composed of flour, grated yam, shredded cabbage, egg as a base, with common fillings including pork belly, octopus, squid, shrimp, and various vegetables; the top is then spread with Worcestershire

sauce and drizzled with mayonnaise, and bonito flakes, flakes of green laver, and/or pickled ginger can be sprinkled on top.

-Terminology-

“In what month, on what day and at what time, how many times has the Earth turned?”: This is an impossible question that cannot be answered used by Japanese elementary students to annoy another person during an argument. Basically a more complex method to insult someone.

Boke & Tsukkomi Routine: Known as ‘Manzai’, a traditional style often associated with the Ōsaka region, is a stand-up comedy act involving a duo trading jokes at great speeds on various subjects, with the straight man (*tsukkomi*) trying to correct the funny man’s (*boke*) misconceptions that revolve around mutual misunderstandings, puns and other verbal gags. The comedians often speak in the Kansai dialect during their acts.

Red String of Fate: Also known as ‘Red Thread of Marriage’, it is an East Asian belief originating from Chinese legend. The myth describes the gods tying an invisible red cord around the ankles of those destined to meet one another in situations or to help each other. The two people connected by the unbreakable red string are destined lovers.

Grad anthology: A book created by a student’s entire class. It is a book that compiles all their dreams, hopes, and ambitions in short paragraphs. Each student receives a copy.

Tetsujin Senshi Robotter: Literally translated as ‘Iron Warrior Robotter’, it is an in-universe anime pertaining to giant robots. Such popular examples are Power Rangers/Super Sentai series, Voltron, Mazinger, Gigantor/Tetsujin 28-gō, and more...

Tokusatsu: Literally meaning ‘special effects’. Though in theory this term refers to any kind of live-action show that makes extensive use of special effects, in practice it often refers specifically to those shows starring a superhero-like figure and villains in elaborate, cover-all costumes, e.g. *Super Sentai* or *Kamen Rider*. *Power Rangers*, the American adaptation of *Super Sentai*, is one example of this type of show that became popular outside of Asia.

Tankōbon: A Japanese term that means ‘independent/standalone book’. It is a term for books that are complete in itself and are not part of a series. It is often used in reference to individual volumes of a single manga, as opposed to magazines which feature multiple series.

Weekly Shōnen Smile: A pastiche of popular manga magazines aimed toward preteen and teenage boys, such as *Weekly Shōnen Magazine* and *Weekly Shōnen Jump*. ‘Shōnen’ can be translated as ‘youth’.

Handshake Session: An event where one gets to meet and shake hands with their favourite member, whether it be an idol, singer of a band, or a costumed hero/heroine.

Shōwa: The traditional Japanese calendar measures generations or eras based on the length of an emperor's reign; this period is then named with the emperor's selected posthumous name. Emperor Shōwa reigned from 1926 to 1989 – the longest of any emperor's reign so far.

Nadeshiko Japan, Nadeshiko League: Nicknames for the Japan National Women's Football Team, the most successful national women's team in the Asian Football Federation and the only Asian team to win the FIFA Women's World Cup.

Yōkai: a supernatural entity in Japanese folklore, considered similar to a spirit, demon, or a monster. This covers a wide variety of different creatures, from the human or animal-like to the more plant-like, and even those disguised as inanimate objects. One such Yōkai is an oni, a supernatural demon, devil, ogre, or a troll.

Kyūdō: It means 'The Way of the Bow'. A Japanese martial art of archery, practiced by thousands worldwide. Archers use a tall Japanese bow made of bamboo, wood and leather using techniques unchanged for centuries. It focuses on Zen Buddhist philosophies and principles to achieve a certain state of mind regarding moral and spiritual development.

Sharp Pen: A portable pen-sized scanner that can recognise and give definitions on various languages. It is essentially an electronic dictionary in the shape of a large pen. Such products are designed and developed by *Sharp Corporation*, a Japanese multinational corporation.

Yorishiro: A Shinto terminology referring to objects capable of attracting spirits, thus providing them a physical space to occupy. The word means 'approach substitute'.

-Definition of Names-

Yayoi's name: Yayoi is the Japanese name for the third month of the lunar calendar, most often equivalent to March or April on the Gregorian calendar, hence the association with spring.

Yui's name: The name Yui is often written with this kanji: 結, as used in the verb *musubu*, meaning "to tie, to bind" or "to unite."

Nao's name: The kanji discussed here, with a kun-reading of 'nao' (直), means 'straight', 'honest', or 'frank'.

-{This project was translated by Gravity Mage and many other contributors using a mixture of Machine Translations and Japanese dictionaries such as *jisho.org* for definitions, *ejje.weblio.jp* for sentence references, and *thejadednetwork.com* for onomatopoeia words}-